Arrowsmith™

BEHIND ENEMY LINES

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CHAPTER ONE

In the Cold Morning Air

Near Montdidier, Gallia. March 1916.

You get used to anything, in time. Anything. I wouldn't have believed it, but it's true.

~from the Journals of Fletcher Arrowsmith

We wake up in these drafty barracks. We eat, we patrol. We fight, if we have to. We drink, we sleep.

hnnnn...

Then we do it again.

After a while, it starts to feel like home.

The mud, the food, the smell and noise of scores of men. The eternal smoke. My heart actually lifts at the sight of this place.

Who would have thought it?

AHH.

But the coffee's good, at least.

And the men...

...I wouldn't give up the friends I've made here for a million bucks.

We're all exhausted, though. Always.

They say that's good...

...that it counters the adrenaline rush of combat...

...keeps you acting on instinct, not panic.

I have my doubts.

WHAT'S THE ***GOOD WORD***, VIRGE?

It makes a good excuse to stay up late drinking, though.

THE WAR IS OVER. PRUSSIA'S SURRENDERED ***UNCONDITIONALLY***, AND WE'RE OFF TO ***LUSITANIA*** TO LOLL ON THE BEACH WITH THE ENTIRE ***NURSING CORPS***.

OH, I LIKE ***THAT***.

PATROUILLE FOUR!

IN THE AIRYARD, ***FORWARD RECON!*** BOOTS UP IN ***THREE MINUTES!***

YES, ME TOO. I'D LIKE IT EVEN MORE IF IT WERE ***TRUE***, THOUGH.

Outside, in the morning air, we whistled —

CHI CHI CHIH

MISSED YOU ***TOO***, HILDA.

NICE AND WARM IN YOUR LOFT, THOUGH. ALL THE BEETLES YOU CAN ***EAT***, HM?

DEEP SWEEP, NORTH AND WEST!

THE PRUSSIANS WON'T WAIT FOREVER, YOU KNOW! STRIKE HARD, STRIKE SWIFTLY —

— AND MAY THE LORD BE WITH YOU!

COMMENCE...

...NOW!

We ran. And we muttered the words.

The words that transfer our dragonets' power of flight —

We always feel it in our legs, first.

Like we're running on the footway —

Then the air lifts us —

KAAAAAAA

ATTAGIRL, HILDA —

For a moment we're still running —

And then —

This part, at least, I never grew tired of.

The morning light. The ugly scars of the front lines softened by mist. The air around us like a living thing.

It was bitterly cold.

But we waited, and didn't cast our warming spells until we were at patrol altitude, where it was even colder.

This part, I loved.

I KNOW, GIRL. I KNOW.

CRRRT

Even in the middle of everything, the feeling of flight, the currents of the winds —

— it touched my soul in a way I never knew anything could.

Not that I ever forgot what lay below us.

Or didn't feel it in the air when we passed over the trenches, heading into Prussian territory.

They'd been sending sorties past our lines, dropping explosives on our artillery positions. So our job was to get to them first...

... and make it hurt.

SST!

BELOW. TWO O'CLOCK.

We tried to draw our swords silently...

... or mutter spell-words that'd load our crossbows with prana-bolts.

We wanted to take them unawares.

Unfortunately...

SCHEISSE!

AN DIE SCHWERTER! DIE GALLIER!

They rose to meet us – fast, fierce –

TCHA!

HTT!

And in a moment, the air was full – of the grunts and curses of men, the martial hiss of dragonets –

– and the sizzle of magic, as our spurs dug into air.

He pushed close, trying to keep me from using my 'bow.

NNNAHH!

I ducked his blade, pedaled frantically backward –

I almost missed him, from two feet away.

KIAAAAA!

PTAM

ACHH!

But it was enough.

As he fell back, I saw that he was young. As young as I was when I first arrived, maybe younger.

AH!

FLETCH!

CHHHH!

In a moment it was worse. Hilda was hit — Hilda! —

But this was war...

... and you can't let yourself get distracted in battle.

And I wondered, for just a second, what kind of life he might have had...

– and it was our turn to fall.

I felt Hilda's panic and fear, through the flight spell –

– but I could also tell she wasn't seriously injured. That she'd absorbed most of the prana.

AW, HILDA.

I'M SORRY. I'M SORRY.

IT'LL BE OKAY, GIRL. IT'LL BE ALL RIGHT...

AVIRAL FLUM

– to transfer the properties of a silk scarf, like we did with the dragonets' flight –

They'd taught us another spell, recently –

– to fall gently, like cloth in a breeze –

GOOD GIRL, GOOD GIRL.

YOU'RE OKAY, YOU'RE ALL RIGHT...

She looked so miserable. I wondered how I could do this to her.

But I knew. I knew...

London, Albion.
Six weeks earlier.

I'd been cycled off the line to give me a breather. It wasn't good for the concentration to go into combat day after day for too long.

But I was still working. Couriering messages around London for various branches of the military.

It was peaceful, at least...

... even if they did keep me hopping.

CH-CH-CH!

I KNOW, HILDA. YOU'RE *HUNGRY.* WE'LL TAKE CARE OF THAT SOON.

Beans

SOAP KINGS

AH! TA VERY MUCH — WE WERE *TOLD* WE'D GET THESE RESEARCH REPORTS FIRST THING!

WELL, YOU KNOW HOW *WIZARDS* ARE...

HA! DON'T WE *ALL!*

WIZARDS, GENERALS, *ADMIRALS...*

But as I was leaving...

VLETCH-BOY!

HUH?

HILDA! HILDA, *LOOK!*

HOW YOU *BE'S*, VLETCH-BOY?

IS GUD FOR *SEE* YOU, ANH?

ROCKY!

I DON'T BELIEVE IT!

KI KI KI KI!

WHAT ARE YOU DOING IN *LONDON*, ROCKY? LAST I HEARD, YOU WERE OFF TO *BAR-LE-DUC!*

AH, *WAIT*, WAIT, WAIT. DON'T TELL ME...

YOU WENT AND GOT YOURSELF *BLOWN UP* AGAIN?

EHH, *YOU* KNOW HOW IT GO, BOY.

ROCKY NOT WOOP AROUND IN DE *AIRS* LIKE YOU BIRDY-MENS. ROCKY SLOW, ON GROUND LIKE LUMP. GET *BLAMMED* BY 'NUDDER GRENADE.

DOC FILL WIT' *CONGRETES* AGAIN. IT HEAL RIGHT UP.

I HAD NO *IDEA!* HEY, I TELL YOU WHAT...

Rocky was on leave, and that had been my last delivery for the day. I suggested we go get a drink and catch up.

There was a pub across the way, with a lot of servicemen...

I DUN'T *KNOW*...

AW, *C'MON.* IT'S A NICE-LOOKING PLACE.

HEY, *BARTENDER*...

TT.

WE DON'T SERVE *TROLL DRINKS* HERE, LAD...

NOT A PROBLEM. JUST GET YOUR *BIGGEST* TANKARD — HECK, A *COOKPOT* — AND FILL IT WITH COFFEE. BUT DUMP IN SOME *COFFEE GROUNDS,* TOO —

AH —

— ENOUGH TO MAKE IT NICE AND *MUDDY.* THAT'S HOW ROCKY LIKES IT. *RIGHT,* ROCK?

IS *TRUE.* BUT —

KCHUH

HUH.

NO CHAIRS THAT'LL *HOLD* YOU. BUT WE CAN MAKE DO...

I filled Rocky in on what I'd been doing since we last met. Not that it took very long. Aerodrome life is aerodrome life.

...THEN, LUCKY ME, THEY SENT ME HERE, TO FLIT *HITHER* AND *YON* ALL DAY.

CHU CHU HUH...

HOW ABOUT *YOU?*

EHH. DIG *TRENCH.* BRACE TIMBERS IN *TRENCH.* RUN T'RU *BARB WIRES.*

BOMBS AN' *BOOMS.* YOU KNOW.

YEAH. A NEW *ADVENTURE,* EVERY DAY.

Neither of us wanted to talk about the war. You wouldn't think anything could be horrible and boring at the same time.

BUT HEY, MY *MAIL'S* BEEN CATCHING UP TO ME, AT LEAST. I GOT LETTERS FROM HOME.

YAH? HOW IS VAM'LY? HOW IS YOU *BRUDDA?*

MARTY'S ALL RIGHT. GRETCH SAYS THE U.S. IS GOING TO BE *IN IT* SOON, AND MAYBE DAD'LL LET HIM *JOIN UP* THEN.

AND *WINNIE* WROTE TOO. SHE SAYS *HER* DAD'S GOT A NEW JOB. A BIG MANUFACTURING CONCERN'S BUILDING A *FACTORY* IN TOWN.

FOR *MAGICAL ITEMS.* ESSENTIAL *WAR* STUFF, AND THEY'LL CONVERT TO OTHER GOODS WHEN IT'S ALL OVER. BUT —

BUT YOU *POPPA...*

YEAH. CAN'T HAVE *IRONWORKS* NEARBY, SO THE BLACKSMITH SHOP'S GOT TO MOVE. HE'LL BE *FURIOUS.*

HE A GOOD MAN, VLETCH. HE WORK *HARD* FOR VAM'LY.

BUT EVERYTHING *CHANGES.* SO MUCH, AND SO *FAST,* THESE DAYS.

I MEAN, YOU AND ME, WE WERE ON THE *ERIE SHORES* IN CONNECTICUT, AND NOW...

IT WAS JUST LAST SPRING. BUT IT SEEMS LIKE *FOREVER* AGO...

"GRETCH AND I, WE'D *SNEAK OUT,* SPY ON YOU AT YOUR PRAYERS. IT SEEMED LIKE — LIKE GETTING A GLIMPSE OF SOME IMPOSSIBLE *FAIRY TALE.*

"AND NOW WE'RE *HERE.*

"I'VE GOT *HILDA,* YOU'VE GOT A *HOLE* IN YOUR ARM, AND ALL OF EUROPE'S ON *FIRE,* IT SEEMS LIKE."

WE NEVER MEANT ANY *DISRESPECT, GRETCHEN* AND I...

IS OGAY. ROCKY KNEW YOU DERE, AN' YOU WASN'T *HURTIN'* NOTTING. RITUALS IS PRIVATE...

...BUT BEGAUSE DEY IS *SOLEMN.* NOT SEGRETS.

WELL. *THAT'S* GOOD TO KNOW.

YOU *GOOD KID,* VLETCH-BOY.

ALLA TIME ROCKY *KNOW* YOU, YOU GOOD KID.

AND HOW IS *GORL* ROCKY MEET WIT' YOU? SHE OGAY TOO?

GRACE?

I DON'T KNOW.

SHE'S... I HAVEN'T *HEARD* FROM HER IN A WHILE.

I'VE WRITTEN TO HER, AND SHE WRITES BACK SOMETIMES. BUT SHE'S DRIVING AMBULANCES NEAR *VERDUN.* SHE MUST BE REALLY *BUSY.*

YAH, *DAT* MUS' BE IT.

SHE BUSY. YOU HEAR FROM HER *SOON,* I BET.

YEAH...

And that's when I realized...

...no one else in the pub was talking.

HUH?

YOU KNOW, LAD, THERE'S TROLL PUBS. DOWN IN *LIMEHOUSE,* I THINK.

BUT THIS...

...THIS AIN'T NO *TROLL PUB,* YOU FOLLOW?

CHHHH...

OH, *YEAH?*

YOU HAVE A PROBLEM WITH MY *FRIEND* HERE — A *SERVICEMAN* WOUNDED IN THE LINE OF DUTY WHILE PROTECTING YOU AND *YOURS* —

VLETCH, YOU DON' GOTTA —

— HAVING A QUIET DRINK WITH AN *OLD FRIEND?*

I'M *SAYIN'*, LAD —

— THAT THERE'S *PLACES* TROLLS ARE WELCOME.

PLACES *SNOT-NOSED* YANK FLIERS WHO WOULDN'T KNOW REAL SOLDIERING IF IT BIT 'EM ON THE ARSE ARE, TOO. BUT IT AIN'T *HERE.* YOU FOLLOW ME *NOW?*

MAYBE. AND MAYBE —

— AERIAL COMBAT —

WHOAA-!

KRSSH!!

— TEACHES A MAN A *THING OR TWO* YOU GROUND-POUNDERS DON'T LEARN.

YOU FOLLOW *ME?*

TAKE THIS PUNK *APART,* BOYS.

'EY!

Y'LITTLE —

NO!

WH —

?

KAAAA!

DE FIGHT, HE IS DONE! YOU VOLLA ME?

YOU VOLLA ME?

AH, *YES,* YES —

— I F-FOLLOW YOU — !

We settled our bill and headed out...

SORRY ABOUT THAT, ROCKY. I COULD HAVE HANDLED THAT BETTER.

AND I PROBABLY SHOULD HAVE PICKED A MORE WELCOMING *PLACE,* HUH?

MEBBE CHUST A *LIDDLE...*

OH, BUT THE LOOK ON THEIR *FACES* WHEN YOU HOISTED THOSE KEGS...

=KHEH= DEY NOT *EMPTY,* NEIDER.

"*GROUN'*-POUN'ERS." ROCKY IS GROUN'-POUN'ER *TOO,* YOU KNOW.

=HNEH= BEST THERE *IS,* PAL...

And that was the end of it, I thought...

The War Office. Whitehall.

...until two mornings later, when I got orders to report to a particular room in a particular building.

ARROWSMITH, HM? YES, YES...

I wasn't given the names of who I was to meet with, even when I arrived...

...and they didn't introduce themselves.

But judging from their uniforms, they were with the Albionese Air Command.

THERE WAS AN...*INCIDENT*, RECENTLY, WITH SOME ALBIONESE SOLDERS, INVOLVING YOU AND A P.F.C. RAKH... *RAKHMATAK*...

YES, SIR.

BUT WHAT HAPPENED WASN'T *ROCKY'S* FAULT, SIR. IF ANYTHING, IT WAS *MINE*, AND I TAKE FULL —

RELAX, LAD. YOU'RE NOT IN ANY *TROUBLE*. NOR IS HE.

BUT TELL US...

...HOW MUCH DO YOU *KNOW* ABOUT TROLLS?

I'M...NOT SURE WHAT YOU *MEAN*, SIR.

ROCKY, AH...P.F.C. TOK IS A *FRIEND* OF MINE, SIR.

TELL US *MORE*, LIEUTENANT. HOW DO YOU KNOW HIM? DO YOU KNOW *OTHER* TROLLS?

FULL *DETAILS*, YOUNG MAN.

WELL, AH...

I'M FROM ***HERBERTSVILLE, CONNECTICUT.*** IN THE UNITED STATES OF COLUMBIA. IT'S A... IT'S NOT THAT BIG A ***TOWN.***

THERE'VE ALWAYS BEEN A FEW ***ROCK TROLLS*** AROUND, MOSTLY WORKING ON FARMS, OR AT THE QUARRY.

BUT ***ROCKY...*** HE WORKED FOR MY FATHER. MY DAD'S A ***BLACKSMITH.*** ROCKY'S A ***HARD WORKER,*** AND A GOOD...HE'S A GOOD GUY, SIR.

HE CAME TO THE U.S. AFTER PRUSSIA INVADED ***LOTHARINGIA.*** HIS FAMILY WAS KILLED. HE ***ESCAPED.***

HE LIVED IN A ***COTTAGE*** BEHIND OUR HOUSE. MY SISTER AND I...WE SPENT ***TIME*** WITH HIM, ***TALKED*** TO HIM, LEARNED A ***LOT*** ABOUT TROLLS.

HMM. NOT AS MUCH EXPERIENCE AS I'D HAVE ***LIKED,*** BUT STILL. NEEDS MUST.

CAMELOT

THERE'S AN IMPORTANT ***UNDERCOVER MISSION*** GOING ON IN PRUSSIA, LAD.

WE HAVE A MAN IN PLACE, BUT HIS ***CONTACT*** MAN WAS CAPTURED.

WE MUST ASSUME THE ***OPERATIONAL PLANS*** ARE NO LONGER SECURE.

WE HAVE FORMULATED ***NEW*** PLANS. WE NEED TO GET THEM INTO PRUSSIA. BUT WE NEED SOMEONE WHO CAN WORK WITH ***TROLLS.***

IT'S, AH... ***IMPORTANT,*** SIR? THE MISSION?

TENS OF THOUSANDS OF LIVES ***DEPEND*** ON IT. AND POSSIBLY, THE ***SWIFT OUTCOME*** OF THIS WHOLE MESS.

THE OVERSEAS AERO CORPS HAS AGREED TO ***SECOND*** YOU TO OUR COMMAND, IF YOU'RE WILLING. ***WELL?***

I, AH...

Somewhere in western Lotharingia.

KSSH BSH TSH KSSH

UHFF!

They told me I'd be "inserted" into Prussian-controlled territory naturally.

They didn't tell me the fake prana-charge would nearly break my arm.

hnn.

They also told me I could expect to have twenty minutes before the Boche located me. More, if I was lucky.

HIER!

DAMMIT!

DAMMIT, DAMMIT, DAMMIT!

ER KAM HIER IRGENDWO RUNTER!

It was closer to three.

=WHHHHHT=

HILDA! HERE! WE DON'T HAVE ANY *TIME!*

CRRT?

SHH, SHH.

I'M SORRY I GOT YOU *HURT,* GIRL. I DIDN'T MEAN TO. I *LOVE* YOU.

BUT WE'VE GOT TO DO LIKE WE WERE *TRAINED,* NOW.

YOU TAKE *THESE.* AND YOU *HIDE.*

STAY CLOSE, BUT OUT OF SIGHT. *YOU* KNOW HOW.

KA KA

NO, NO. YOU *GO.* GO *HIDE.*

The Prussians confiscated any orichalc chips captured, used them for their own airmen.

So it was important they didn't get mine. Doubly important, in this case.

CRU-CRU-CRU...

I hated to see her go. But at least...

...the mission was still on track.

HÄNDE HOCH!

KEINE BEWEGUNG!

KEINE BEWEGUNG, SONST SCHIESSEN WIR!

DU BIST JETZT UNSER GEFANGENER!

CHAPTER TWO

Shadows Over the Land

ALBIONER?

COLUMBIAN. FROM THE *STATES*. I'M WITH THE *OVERSEAS AERO CORPS*.

Somewhere in occupied Lotharingia, headed toward Swabia. March 1916.

When I was captured, they treated me pretty roughly at first. But once they had me secured, and safely behind the lines...

...that changed. I was, after all, an officer.

Not everyone was, on that transport train. There were Gallian infantry, an oakman, a Hibernian hellhound and more.

The silver wire on the windows wasn't just for show.

WELL, LIEUTENANT, YOUR *KRIEG* — YOUR *WAR* IS OVER NOW.

I GUESS.

YOUR ARM. MAY I *EXAMINE* IT?

TCH. IT'S A CLEAN FRACTURE. THE *MEDICAL MAGES* WILL HEAL IT SWIFTLY. STILL, I'M SURPRISED YOU WERE ABLE TO USE IT *AT ALL*.

THAT MAKES *TWO* OF US, DOC.

WAS HIS ORICHALC RECOVERED? HIS DRAGONET?

THE REPORT SAYS HIS FLIGHT CHIPS WERE NOT FOUND ON HIM. HIS DRAGONET WAS SPOTTED, BUT EVADED FIRE.

HMP. STANDARD PROCEDURE, THESE DAYS.

I'd completed the first part of my mission, at least. Not that it was hard, just painful.

WELL, TELL THE GUARDS TO KEEP A WATCH FOR IT. IT'LL STAY CLOSE TO HIM.

Still, I couldn't help but wonder. The men who sent me here...

London, Albion. The War Office.

...did they know yet?

SIRS?

***YES**, JOHNSON. WHAT DO YOU HAVE FOR US?*

NEWS FROM THE ***S.I.S.,*** SIR. THE MAN YOU SAID TO LOOK OUT FOR – ***LIEUTENANT ARROWSMITH.*** HE WAS DOWNED YESTERDAY MORNING.

THEY SAY HE LANDED SAFELY AND WAS TAKEN ***WITHOUT INCIDENT.***

***GOOD,** GOOD. WE'RE **UNDER-WAY,** THEN.*

WHEN THE WORD COMES THROUGH ON ***OFFICIAL COMMUNIQUÉS,*** ALERT THE CRUX.

THEY'LL NEED TO KNOW.

NOTHING ABOUT HIS ***MISSION,*** OF COURSE. JUST THE NORMAL ***PRISONER LISTS.***

AND, ***JOHNSON?***

HOPE FOR THE ***BEST.***

SIR. YES, ***SIR.***

Either way, they weren't really in control of my fate anymore. That lay elsewhere.

Wien, Tyrolia.

Capital of the Dual Monarchy of Tyrolia~Hungary.

Just the thought of me being discussed in Wien sent chills up my spine. Even just the idea of them knowing my name at all.

It was the true heart of the Central Powers, from all we knew.

And all the reports were that dark, dark things were happening there...

Die Schnecke

SOFIA!

YOU BE CAREFUL NOW, YOU HEAR?

STAY TO LIGHTED STREETS, GIRL! YOU KNOW HOW THINGS ARE!

SHE SHOULD STAY HERE AT NIGHT, OSKAR. YOU HAVE ROOM.

SHE WON'T STAY. SHE HAS HER MOTHER TO LOOK AFTER, AND HER BOYS. HER HUSBAND IS OFF IN THE WAR...

EVEN SO. THERE ARE VAMPIRES OUT THERE THESE DAYS. VAMPIRES AND WORSE.

GIRLS ARE GOING MISSING...

IT'S THE NECROMANCERS, I TELL YOU.

THEM AND THEIR FOUL MAGICS.

YOU SHUT UP WITH THAT TALK, JONAS. WE'RE AT WAR — WE MUST DO WHAT IT TAKES TO PRESERVE OUR HOMELAND!

"PRESERVE."

PFF.

WHAT WILL BE PRESERVED, MAN? EVEN IF WE WIN, THESE FIENDS WILL RULE. THE WHOLE EMPIRE'S BEING HANDED TO THE UNSEELIE, US ALONG WITH —

SST! SST!

WATCH WHAT YOU SAY, ALL OF YOU! FOOLS!

WE ARE NOT FAR FROM THE PALACE, AFTER ALL. AND THE EMPEROR, MAY GOD BLESS AND KEEP HIM...

...HAS EYES AND EARS EVERYWHERE...!

WINE!

QUICKLY, MAN!

MORE WINE FOR THE EMPEROR!

I HASTEN, YOUR IMPERIAL MAJESTY.

MORE WINE...

MORE WINE FOR THE EMPEROR...

AH, E-EXCUSE ME? YOUR IMPERIAL MAJESTY?

WHAT?

WHAT?

WE'RE, AH, JUST BACK FROM MEETING WITH THE KAISER'S WAR COUNCIL, AND WE HAVE —

NONE OF THAT HERE. NONE, NONE, NONE OF IT.

THE EMPEROR IS NOT TO BE BOTHERED WITH SUCH MATTERS! THEY ARE BENEATH HIM! HE HAS...HAS LOFTIER MATTERS TO CONCERN HIM.

OUT! SPEAK TO MY ADVISORS. THEY HANDLE ALL WAR MATTERS, ALL OF THAT...

THE ADVISORS.

YES, YES. I'D HOPED, WHILE WE WERE GONE, THAT... BUT NO. NOTHING'S GOING TO CHANGE. NOTHING.

THE ADVISORS, THEN. THEY'LL BE DOWN IN THE CRYPTS, WITH...

"...WITH HIM."

WE HEAR, GREAT ONE.

WE HEAR, AND WILL SEE THAT YOUR ORDERS ARE CARRIED OUT.

OUR GREETINGS, AH, GREAT ONE.

THE KAISER'S MEN — THEY SAY THE SPY DIED IN INTERROGATION. BUT THEY'RE FULLY CONFIDENT THERE IS NO FURTHER —

SILENCE.

THE ENEMY'S PLANS TO COUNTER US HAVE ONLY BEEN INTERRUPTED. NOT ENDED.

THEIR AGENT MUST BE FOUND. AND EXPOSED.

YOUR TURN, GENTLEMEN. DON'T BE SHY.

PUT THE BARON ON THE SCENT. TELL HIM...

"...IT WILL BE ONE OF THESE MODERN 'FLIERS'..."

The prison camp was deep in Swabia, which the Prussians and Tyrolians had snapped up in the early days of the war.

I should have been making contact with the Albionese agent, whoever he was...

...but I couldn't. Not so long as I was in the hospital wing.

It wasn't a bad camp, I'd say. Not that I had much to compare it to.

They questioned me, but there was no torture. And they tried to call Hilda, but she was too smart for that.

So mostly, I was just waiting around, while their mages' spells healed my arm. It itched. But at least there were distractions...

mailgoll mailgoll

mail f' lidnurt flesh'arr'smiff!

HM?

OH, *THANK* YOU.

It was from Winnie.

...ar Fletcher,

...e you're doing well. I keep reading th... ...ar news, and it's very troubling sometim... ...worry for you. Everyone here at home doe... ...ut I tell everyone you're careful, and you'll ...e all right. Just make sure you don't make a ...liar of me! That's a joke, but still, stay ...healthy, or I'll be very cross with you. Another joke.

The new munitions factory is under construction, and they're building it fast. My father's very enthusiastic, since it means an important job for him. Your father still doesn't like it, of course. They're paying for a whole new smithy for him, bigger and better than the old one, but you know him. Gretchen says he shouts all the time. But he'll be all right too.

I hope you get to come home on leave soon, and bring your dragon with you. I've never ...a dragon. My father says the bia...

They didn't know I'd been captured yet, back home. But both sides — they exchanged mail for prisoners.

HMP. I GUESS THAT'S HOW *"CIVILIZED NATIONS"* DO THINGS...

is more is more. more mail f'lidnurt

The other letter was from Grace.

I didn't really know what to think about it.

She was very chatty and light, telling a few funny stories about camp life.

But there was an officer she kept mentioning, a Major Garnier. It seemed like they spent a lot of their free time together.

And it's not like we'd agreed to be sweethearts, but...

"Sweethearts." I sound like a schoolboy.

I found myself thinking back, to all that's changed. And so fast.

It wasn't all that long ago I was just a schoolboy, growing up in Herbertsville, in western Connecticut, on the Great Lakes.

Then the Overseas Aero Corps came through town, putting on air shows, fundraising...

LOOK AT 'EM!

Jonathan and I ran off to join up. We couldn't wait to be like them.

To learn to fly...

That was wonderful. That was the stuff of dreams.

But the war...

It wasn't what we'd thought it'd be like...

JONATHAN...!

Jonathan. May God rest his soul.

And now...

A-ATTENTION! ATTENTION ON THE WARD! W-WE HAVE —

TT.

PLEASE. NO NEED TO RISE.

...now I'm in Occupied Europe, getting visits from the Crux.

YOU ARE THE NOBLE WOUNDED, AFTER ALL.

RIGHTEOUS KNIGHTS, FALLEN IN THE SERVICE OF YOUR NATIONS.

BLESSED BY GOD.

The Society of the Cross, to use their fuller name.

A part of the Catholic Church, who worked internationally to see that prisoners were well-treated. Among other things.

But they were kind of unnerving.

We had the Crux back home, too. But there, they knitted socks for soldiers, ran bake sales at churches. These guys weren't like that.

They visited all of us, in turn. The humans, anyway.

ARROWSMITH, FLETCHER. COLUMBIAN.

YOUR ARM, LIEUTENANT. HOW DOES IT HEAL?

THE MEDICAL WIZARDS TELL ME IT'S DOING WELL, SIR. I'M TOLD I'LL BE OUT OF THE SPLINT IN A FEW DAYS.

HM.

TSK. VERY BAD. VERY BAD INDEED.

WHAT IS IT? IS SOMETHING —

YOUR ***SOUL,*** LIEUTENANT ARROWSMITH. IT IS IN GRAVE DANGER.

NOT FROM THIS ***CAMP,*** OR YOUR INJURY. BUT FROM THE ***MAGIC*** YOU USE.

I'M — I'M NOT SURE WHAT YOU —

lidnunt flesh'arr'smiff has **replies?**

we com **back,** six-sebben o'glock f'pick up new mails

yu got reddy som thens, we **pick up**

TCH!

AWAY, IMP OF HELL.

k-AIIIRRRRRRHHH!

ALL MAGIC IS ***FOUL,*** COLUMBIAN. ALL THAT COMES NOT FROM ***GOD.***

IT IS TWISTED AND ***DEBASED*** FROM THE ***TRUE POWER OF THE LORD!*** IT IS FOUL, AND THE ***CREATURES OF MAGIC*** ARE ***ABOMINATIONS!***

GROW NOT ***COMFORTABLE*** IN YOUR SINS, ***HOWEVER*** NECESSARY THEY MAY BE! ***WATCH*** YOURSELF! ***PURIFY YOURSELF!***

BEFORE IT IS ***TOO LATE FOR YOU!***

gruz?

yu **hokay,** gruz?

Yeah, they weren't like back home.

I wouldn't buy a tray of brownies from these folks on a bet.

April, 1916.

My arm healed, in time...

...and they moved me from the hospital wing over to the main camp. They called it a "Stalag Luft," since we were all airmen.

It wasn't exactly the Ritz. But still, not too bad, considering. And more importantly, I was out among the others, at last.

Free to find my contact.

AND WHAT HAVE WE HERE? ***FRESH BLOOD,*** OR I MISS MY GUESS!

AND A ***YANK,*** TOO, I'M TOLD?

FLETCHER ARROWSMITH, O.A.C. OUT OF ***MONTDIDIER,*** MOST RECENTLY. BEFORE THAT, LONDON, ***SOISSONS,*** A FEW OTHER PLACES.

CALL ME ***FLETCH.***

ALF.

AND I'M ***CORNY.*** GOOD TO KNOW YOU, FLETCH.

WHY DON'T YOU COME WITH US? WE'LL GIVE YOU THE ***GRAND TOUR.***

One of these men was the one I'd risked my life to reach.

If he was even still here.

I had no way of knowing that, of course.

All I could do was act as if he was, and see what happened. He knew someone was coming, after all. Just not that it was me.

Trying to look bored, I scratched a troll rune by the door. The sign that I was here. After that...

...I could only wait.

The Prussians treated us strictly by the rules of the Helvetian Convention...

...though there was a rumor they fed us horsemeat, and weighed the whole animal, head, bones and all, in calculating our ration.

There were a lot of turnips.

As officers, they weren't allowed to make us work...

Y'SEE? THE *GOALTENDER'S* THE ONLY MAN ALLOWED TO USE HIS HANDS.

NOT LIKE IN THE FOOTBALL *YOU* PLAY, EH?

...but we found ways to pass the time. Outdoor sports, exercise, reading, even classes in whatever one of us could teach.

Strange forms of torture...

WHY DO I EVEN *TRY?*

NO, LAD, YOU'RE GETTIN' *BETTER.*

TRUE. YOU USED TO LOSE EVEN *FASTER...*

But my orders said to wait. So I waited.

Until...

It was a couple of weeks later. I'd begun to think my contact, whoever he was, had been exposed. Or transferred elsewhere.

But we had visitors, that day...

...important visitors, from the look of them. From the Kaiser's court, the word was.

I didn't speak Prussian, but I heard the one with the dragonet being called "the Baron."

Some of the guards called him "Der Schwarze Baron," when he wasn't in earshot.

The Black Baron?

Whoever he was, the camp commandant practically fell all over himself bowing and scraping. We were trotted out to be shown off.

WIE SIE SEHEN, HERR BARON, HABEN WIR HIER HOHE ANSPRÜCHE. DAS IST DIE CRÈME DE LA CRÈME DER FEINDLICHEN FLIEGER...

THE *CREAM*?

HARDLY. THIN *WHEY*, I WOULD SAY.

He spoke in Albionese. I didn't understand why, at first.

MOSTLY **COMMONERS,** FROM THE LOOK OF THEM.

NOT **WORTH** THE TOUCH OF MAGIC.

Until I realized — he wanted us to hear him.

To understand what he was saying.

JUST **LOOK** AT THEM. NO BREEDING, NO QUALITY. **PEASANTS** FROM THE BONES OUT.

HSSS...

THESE **LOW STANDARDS** SHOW THAT THE ALLIED POWERS ARE DESPERATE, MONGRELIZING THEIR CULTURE **AND** THEIR OFFICER CORPS.

THIS IS WHY THEY WILL **INEVITABLY** LOSE.

HERE NOW! I AM **EDWARD CORNELIUS HOWARD,** SON OF THE 19TH EARL OF SUFFOLK, AND I WILL **NOT** BE SPOKEN OF IN THIS MANNER!

CORNY, DON'T — !

NOR WILL MY **COMRADES!**

I **DEMAND** AN APOLOGY — OR **SATISFACTION ON THE FIELD OF HONOR!**

And from the look on his face...

WELL, WELL, **WELL.**

HE WANTS **SATISFACTION.** THEN HE SHALL MOST SURELY **HAVE** IT.

...the Black Baron got exactly what he was looking for.

There were strict rules governing dueling during wartime.

They herded us out into the exercise yard. We and the camp staff would serve as monitors, to see the duel was conducted properly.

But as we went...

WH — ?

My troll sign had been responded to, with the countersign.

My contact was here.

But where?

YOU MAY CALL YOUR ***DRAGONET,*** PRISONER. IF IT STILL LIVES.

SHOULD YOU ***WIN,*** IT WILL BE PERMITTED TO ESCAPE AGAIN. WE ***ARE*** GENTLEMEN, AFTER ALL.

YOUR ***SWORD,*** O MIGHTY SON OF NOBILITY.

Was it Corny? Was standing up to the Baron part of the plan? Was that some kind of signal too?

They supplied him with orichalc chips and a sword.

But they did it with mock-deference, making it clear any respect they expressed was false.

And really, none of this was fair. Corny hadn't flown or handled a sword in months. We were all undernourished.

Still...

The Baron took to the sky moments after Corny's dragonet arrived, giving them no time to re-bond.

Once in the air...

...they circled one another warily, watching carefully to gauge each other's strengths...

KAAA!

HSSS...

We held our breath...

WELL, PRISONER?

DO YOU NEED TO FIND YOUR *NERVE*?

DAMN YOU!

I'LL TEACH YOU *MANNERS*, YOU CONDESCENDING, INSOLENT —

— F-AHH!

KTANG

REALLY?

AND HOW DO YOU PROPOSE TO DO *THAT?* BY STUMBLING THROUGH THE AIR LIKE SOME CLUMSY *AMATEUR?* BY LEAVING *YOURSELF* WIDE OPEN —

KIAAAHHH!

AIAA—

— AND YOUR *DRAGONET* VULNERABLE?!

SALOPARD!

THE *BLACKGUARD!*

HE —

It wasn't formally outlawed —

— but it was considered unsporting to attack a dragonet rather than fighting man-to-man.

But just like that...

KII?

...Corny's flying power was halved.

YOU... YOU...YOU HAVE *NO* HONOR...

KRO

PFF.

AS IF A LOUT LIKE YOU COULD EVEN *SPELL* THE WORD.

KILL!

SO.

AHH!

HAVE YOU HAD ENOUGH *"SATISFACTION,"* MAN OF ALBION? *HAVE* YOU?

WOULD YOU LIKE SOME MORE?

Duels of honor were also not generally fought to the death.

HNEHH!

H-IHHHH!

NO.

NO —

And for a moment...

...it seemed as if the Baron was dropping downward to catch Corny, get him to the medical mages.

But...

LET THIS BE A *LESSON* TO YOU, AND TO ALL *BELOW.* OF THE PERIL YOU FACE...

...*WHEN YOU CHALLENGE YOUR BETTERS!*

FRZASHH

And I couldn't...

=hnhh=

KLATTIKAK

HE —

HE BECAME A —

C-C'ETAIT —

I couldn't see straight. I couldn't breathe. What he'd done, how he'd sneered, I just wanted...

NO, LAD, *DON'T*. IT'S WHAT HE WANTS. MORE *VICTIMS* TO PLAY WITH. MORE *GOOD MEN* TO KILL.

BUT HE —

ᚠᛉᛚ

...it was in the rock troll tongue.

YOU...

YOU'RE...

NO.

NO, YOU *CAN'T!* YOU *CAN'T JUST* —

What he'd said...

CHAPTER THREE

A Long Way From Home

Late April, 1916.

My mind was going in circles.

I'd met my contact. Sign and countersign. But I didn't know what to make of him.

I'd seen him around the prison camp, of course. I'd seen everyone. But he was mild, affable, no one's idea of a hero. Or a spy.

Still, that's what you'd want in a spy, wasn't it?

He'd said to meet him on the barracks roof, after midnight. The closest thing to privacy the camp had.

But I'd been watching, while I was there...

...and something out there was moving. Something underground.

And from the way whatever they were made the ground shift and ripple, like the biggest moles I'd ever seen, they weren't small.

There were noises, too. Unsettling, muttering sounds. Like no animal I'd ever heard.

I was wondering what could be making them...

KOBOLDS. OR POSSIBLY ERD-GRIMMEN.

HUH?

THE CREATURES OUT THERE, TUNNELING AROUND THE CAMP. THAT'S WHAT YOU WERE WATCHING SO INTENTLY, YES?

WELL, YES. BUT...

I'M GUY. GLAD TO KNOW YOU — I WAS HOPING THEY'D GET SOMEONE THROUGH.

FLETCHER ARROWSMITH. O.A.C.

He didn't tell me much. I guess that's something you want in a spy, too.

SO. LET'S GET TO IT, THEN. THE MISSION PLANS...

THEY'RE ENSPELLED INTO MY ORICHALC CHIPS. TO MAKE SURE I COULDN'T REVEAL THEM WHEN CAPTURED. EVEN IF I'D WANTED TO.

AND THE CHIPS...

...ARE WITH YOUR DRAGONET. SMART.

THEN WE'LL HAVE TO ESCAPE. AND SOON.

UNFORTUNATELY, THE BOCHE HAVE MADE IT A BIT TRICKIER, JUST NOW.

THAT'S WHY THE BLACK BARON WAS HERE EARLIER, TRYING TO FIND ME. THOSE CRUX AGENTS MUST HAVE SENSED MY PRESENCE, ALERTED THEM.

AND THEY'D BE HUNTING YOU AS WELL.

He was very matter-of-fact. Calm, serious, self-contained. And he sure seemed like he knew what he was doing.

THE *CRUX?* THOSE GUYS WERE KINDA SPOOKY, BUT... ENEMY AGENTS? AREN'T THEY PART OF THE *CHURCH?*

AND HOW WOULD THEY DETECT *YOU,* ONE CAPTURED FLIER IN A WHOLE GROUP OF THEM?

THE CRUX *IS* PART OF THE CHURCH, YES. BUT A VERY OLD PART. AND A *DARK* PART.

THEY'VE NEVER *LIKED* THE WAY THE WORLD CHANGED AFTER THE *PEACE OF CHARLEMAGNE,* AND THEY HAVE THEIR OWN AGENDA.

I noticed that he didn't answer the part about how the Crux would sense him.

But he didn't know me, and signs and countersigns aside, I figured he didn't know yet whether he could trust me.

SO HOW DO WE GET *OUT?*

WE *WERE* TO BE TUNNELED OUT BY ROCK TROLLS. EITHER THEY KNEW THAT FROM YOUR *PREDECESSOR,* WHO DIDN'T LIVE TO REACH THE CAMP...

...OR THEY *DEDUCED* IT.

EITHER WAY, THE TROLLS CAN'T *GET THROUGH* WITHOUT RAISING THE ALARM.

THEN WHAT DO WE *DO?*

WE *RAISE THE ALARM.*

JUST...NOT IN THE WAY THEY'RE ***EXPECTING.***

IT'LL BE ***COSTLY,*** BUT WE'VE GOT NO CHOICE. AND IT'S ALMOST ***CERTAIN*** TO WORK.

ALMOST? WELL, THIS IS WHAT I ***SIGNED UP*** FOR, RIGHT?

YOU TELL ME WHAT TO DO, I'LL ***DO*** IT.

We spread the word around. Quietly.

GOING TO BE AN ESCAPE. SOON. GET SET.

SOON? WHEN'S SOON?

YOU'LL KNOW. JUST BE READY TO CALL YOUR DRAGONET.

IF YOU DON'T HAVE A LIVING DRAGONET, FIND SOMEONE TO CARRY YOU.

MEMOIRS OF A FOUL

THE HOUND OF THE D'OGVILLES

LORD JAMIE

OH, AYE...

THE LAIR OF THE BLACK WORM

BRAM STOKER

There was a sense of excitement growing, as much as we tried to hide it. By Tuesday, as night fell...

...even the guards felt it.

They were on the alert. They just didn't know for what.

Guy made his move about an hour after sundown. I had no idea what he was going to do.

Leaving the barracks after curfew would ordinarily get you a beating, at the very least.

But he didn't seem at all concerned. He could have been out for a Sunday stroll.

I wondered again who he was, aside from "Guy." What was his story?

Then I swear...

...it was like he just twitched his fingers...

...and the clouds rolled in.

He took a deep breath, and the wind rose. Made a small gesture...

...and the skies opened up.

Then he just stood, for a moment, as if gathering his strength.

HÄNDE HOCH! HÄNDE HOCH! HINLEGEN! GESICHT AUF DEN BODEN, DIE HÄNDE ÜBER DEN KOPF!

AUF DEN BODEN! SOFORT! ODER WIR SCHIESSEN!

Then it was like he simply...

...shrugged.

W-WAS? MEIN GOTT—!

KRKRMMM

He reached out, sinking his fingers into the air as if it was a solid thing.

He mumbled something. And...

And if anyone wasn't sure what we meant when we said they'd know when the break was happening...like me, for instance...

NOW?

...we had our answer.

NOW.

You never heard so many men whistling at once.

CH-CH!

AW, *HILDA.*

I LOVE YOU *TOO,* BABY.

KI KI!

GOOD TO *SEE* YOU, BRITOMART.

The guards were still dealing with the quakes. We slipped our orichalc chips into our boots...

Or those without fliers' boots made do...

KAA

We said the spells...

TO THE SKIES!

NOW!

They rose.

It was quite a sight to see them go, so many at once.

AH-AH. NOT US. WE'RE NOT *GOING* THAT WAY.

WHAT? BUT —

I was tensing to join them, but —

There were screams in the skies, then. And great... shapes.

I couldn't see them clearly.

But I saw the fire. I heard the great, rolling growls.

And I heard the men. The dying men.

KIII!

IT'S *AN AMBUSH!* THEY *KNEW* — SOMEHOW, THEY *FOUND OUT!*

GUY! WHAT DO WE *DO?*

WE GO *OVERLAND.* SOUTH AT FIRST. TO THOSE *TREES.*

WE'LL TAKE *EVASIVE ACTION* ONCE WE GET THERE.

BUT — THEY'RE *DYING!*

DO YOU WANT TO DIE *WITH* THEM?

I *TOLD YOU* IT WOULD BE COSTLY. NOW *MOVE,* LAD! *AND QUICKLY!*

Once in the trees, we took to the air, but Guy cautioned me to stay low. He led me deeper into the shadows...

BUT WE CAN'T JUST ***LEAVE THEM!*** WE ***SENT*** THEM! SENT THEM RIGHT ***INTO*** THAT!

IF YOU'D ***LIKE,*** YOU CAN GO BACK. JUST GIVE ME YOUR ***CHIPS*** FIRST — I NEED WHAT'S ON THEM.

OR STAY. BUT THE PRUSSIANS WILL HAVE PREPARED ***GROUND FORCES,*** TOO. AND THEY'LL ***CATCH*** US IF YOU DON'T ***KEEP UP.***

ALL THOSE MEN. THEY WERE ***FRIENDS.*** FELLOW ***OFFICERS.*** ISN'T THERE ***SOMETHING*** WE CAN —

I was looking back when he cast the spell. I didn't hear it. Didn't see anything change.

But when I turned to look...

WH-WHAT IN — ?

It was dizzying. I felt like I couldn't see straight, like things were... warping around me. And there was a smell to the air.

Like cinnamon. Lilac. Burning leaves. Perfume. Like nothing I'd ever smelled before.

I couldn't make sense of anything.

FOCUS ON ME. DON'T ***LOOK AROUND.*** JUST FOLLOW ***ME!*** DIDN'T THEY TEACH YOU ***ANYTHING?***

DON'T LET IT CATCH YOUR ***MIND*** — OR YOU COULD BE ***LOST*** TO IT ***FOREVER!***

I tried to focus on Guy — on nothing but Guy.

But there was so much —

The river — it seemed as wide as an ocean —

Forests so tiny you could cover them with your hand —

And I swear —

— in among the tiny trees I saw houses, so small that —

H-NNNH!

ON ME, BOY! ON ME!

HOW DID THEY *PREPARE YOU* FOR THIS MISSION, ANYWAY?

THERE WAS *NO TIME!* THEY JUST —

MUDMEN! HERE!

NO WARRANT! NO WAY- RIGHT!

SPIKE 'EM FOR THE POT!

DAMN IT! ***ENOUGH*** OF THIS! I'D HOPED WE COULD SLIP THROUGH FOR ***LONGER,*** BUT —

KTULA DARGVAAHA

The world — twisted —

UH.

UH!

SORRY, FLETCH. I WOULDN'T HAVE ***DONE*** THAT IF I'D KNOWN THEY HADN'T ***TRAINED*** YOU.

WHAT WERE THEY ***THINKING,*** SENDING A COMPLETELY UNPREPARED —

IT — SMELL'S FADING — SO BEAUTIFUL —

WAS THAT — THE ***EVENING LANDS?*** WHERE THE — THE ***LIGHTBORN*** — ?

ONLY THE VERY ***EDGE.***

THAT WAS THE ***OUTER MARCHES.*** YOU'D HAVE TO GO FURTHER IN TO REACH THE TRUE ***EVENING LANDS.***

BUT IF YOU WENT THAT FAR WITHOUT ANY ***SAFE-CONDUCT,*** YOU COULD WANDER ***SIXTY YEARS*** OR MORE AND NOT AGE A DAY. AND COME OUT ***CRACKED.***

I'D HOPED TO STAY IN A BIT ***LONGER.*** STILL, IF I MANAGED THE ***EXIT SPELL*** RIGHT, WE SHOULD BE RIGHT ABOUT WHERE WE —

AH.

YOU ARE *LATE.*

WE HAVE EVERY NIGHT FOR *WEEKS* COME, AND THERE HAS BEEN *NO SIGN.* WE WERE ABOUT TO *GIVE YOU UP* AS DEAD.

COULDN'T BE *HELPED.*

BUT WE WERE PURSUED BY... *KOBOLDS,* I THINK. WE LOST THEM IN THE MARCHES, BUT I'M NOT SURE WE FULLY BROKE THE *TRAIL.*

KHHH!

TCHA!

AND NOW WE MUST AFTER STUPID *FOREIGNERS* CLEAN UP. *JAKOB! ERNST!*

AND TELL YOUR LIZARD WE ARE NO *THREAT.* WE *HELP,* NOT HARM.

The two men he called — it was as if they were...patting the grasses, stroking them...humming to them...

WHAT ARE THEY *DOING?*

IT'S TO CALM THE *GROUND.*

THEY'RE SMOOTHING OUT ANY *VIBRATIONS* OUR PASSAGE LEFT BEHIND US, *THROWING* OFF THE KOBOLDS...

AND YOUR *VOICES* YOU THINK NO VIBRATIONS CARRY, HM? *SILENCE,* PLEASE.

FERTIG.

GOOD. ERNA WILL TAKE YOU FURTHER. PLEASE DO NOT BE MORE STUPID. IT IS NOT *YOUR* LIVES ONLY. *ERNA!*

JA, KARL.

VIELEN DANK FÜR DIE HILFE, ERNA.

...YES.

WE GO.

I was still disoriented from the Outer Marches...

...but it was like a mist rose around Karl and the others, and they just faded into shadow.

Then, a few miles later...

THERE IS ***FARMHOUSE.***

IT IS SAFE. BUT ONLY FOR ***ONE NIGHT.*** YOU UNDERSTAND THIS? ONLY ***ONE*** NIGHT.

ONE NIGHT IS ALL WE ***NEED.*** I THANK YOU AGAIN, ERNA.

THERE ARE ***FOODS.*** BLANKETS. CLOTHES SO YOU LOOK LIKE ***PRUSSIAN FARM-WORKER.***

AND WE'RE NOT ***TOO CLOSE*** TO THE CAMP? THEY'LL BE LOOKING...

WE'RE ***FIFTY MILES*** AWAY. I WAS ABLE TO DO ***THAT*** MUCH, AT LEAST.

FIFTY ***MILES?***

I'VE...I'VE GOT ***QUESTIONS,*** GUY. ABOUT WHO YOU ***ARE,*** HOW YOU DO THINGS NO ***FLIER*** CAN DO. ARE YOU —

NOT ***YET.*** I NEED TO CHECK THE ***PERIMETER...***

...AND YOU'LL BE WOOZY FOR A *FEW HOURS* YET FROM OUR LITTLE SIDE TRIP. GET SOME *REST,* LAD.

ERNA WILL SHOW YOU WHERE TO SLEEP.

YOU ARE NAMED *FLETCHER?*

YES. *LOOK,* I'M SURE I CAN —

UP *HERE,* FLETCHER.

HERE IS *HAY.* IT IS NOT SO COMFORTABLE, BUT BLANKETS ARE THICK. AND HERE YOU ARE *SAFE.*

YEAH, I'VE SLEPT IN BARNS BACK *HOME.*

AND "BACK HOME" IS *UNITED STATES OF COLUMBIA?* YOU HAVE COME FAR TO FIGHT OUR WAR, HERR FLETCHER. *VERY FAR.*

SIT A MOMENT.

IT IS A *GOOD THING* YOU DO, COMING TO FREE PRUSSIA. I AM FROM *HANNOVER.* IT WAS NOT *ALWAYS* PART OF PRUSSIA.

MY *GRANDFATHER* FIGHTS TO KEEP US *FREE* OF PRUSSIA UNTIL HE DIES.

AND I...

I FIGHT *TOO*, NOW, IN ANY WAY I CAN.

IT IS A *HARD FIGHT.*

ERNA! ARE YOU —

I AM... *SATISFACTORY*. THE SCARS ARE OLD NOW.

I WORK WHEN THEY ORDER ME. IN MUNITIONS FACTORY. MAKING *MAGICAL WEAPONS*, YES? BUT I *SABOTAGE*, WHEN I CAN.

AND...IS THAT HOW YOU WERE *WOUNDED?*

NO.

THAT IS JUST THE *WORK.*

MANY OF US BECOME INJURED BADLY. SOMETIMES WE *DIE.* THE NEED FOR THE WEAPONS IS TOO GREAT TO *SAFETY* TAKE TIME FOR.

YOU SEE?

THEY DON'T *CARE* ABOUT US. JUST THE *POWER* THEY SEEK TO TAKE AND HOLD.

I couldn't help it. I thought about the factory they were building back home in Herbertsville. And the friends who'd work there.

And how everything seems to change for the worse.

FLETCHER?

THEY DON'T *CARE.*

AND HOW MANY *MACHINES OF DEATH* FOR THEM WE CAN MAKE.

What were we fighting for, if the fight is destroying what we're fighting to save?

And my head was still spinning. We seemed to have been talking a long time.

WHERE'S *GUY?*

GUY IS *SMART.* HE WILL BE FINE.

For a minute, I wondered if he'd abandoned me. I'd got him out, did he need me anymore?

TRR?

But no, it was he who'd gotten us out.

And they said they needed me because I know about trolls. And the plans, they were spelled into my chips...

THEY'RE... STILL THERE...

YES, GOOD, BOOTS *OFF,* WE TAKE.

UM, I WASN'T...

IT HELP YOU *RELAX.* GUY SAYS YOU *REST* NEED.

SCHNAPPS?

OH, NOW *THERE'S* A TERRIBLE IDEA.

GIVE IT *HERE.*

HA HA! NOT SO FAST — IT IS VERY *STRONG.*

We drank.

And we talked. About farms. Blacksmithing. Anything. Just not the war. Anything but the war.

And it started getting very — warm, up in the hayloft.

FLETCHER.

I SHOULD... I SHOULD GO FIND *GUY.*

FLETCHER.

MAYBE SOMETHING...

NO, FLETCHER.

NO.

UM —

YOUR FRIEND GUY A VERY *CAPABLE SOLDIER* IS. HE IS FINE. YOU ARE FINE. *WE* ARE FINE.

VERY FINE.

I thought about Grace.

We hadn't made any promises. It wasn't really the way, in wartime.

FLETCHER.

I thought about the officer she talked about in her letters.

CRUU?

I thought –

COME.

OFF. OFF.

Would it be rude to say no? I didn't know. I couldn't think.

But she'd been hurt so much. She was helping us –

O-OKAY...

OH, YES, YES. HOLD ME CLOSE, LIEBSTER.

HALT MICH FEST UND LASS MICH NIE WIEDER LOS.

And then –

YLLL...

Then I wasn't thinking at all.

JA, JA...

STEFAN... STEFAN...

STEFAN –

CRACK

FFT

CHAPTER FOUR

Overland Flight

Stalag Luft Elke.
Occupied Swabia.

Late April, 1916.

THIRTY-TWO DEAD, AMONG THE PRISONERS. ANOTHER TEN RECAPTURED SO FAR. THE PRISON BREAK WAS A SPECTACULAR FAILURE.

BUT WE HAVE TWO STAFF KILLED, SEVEN MORE INJU —

ENOUGH.

I DO NOT CARE ABOUT YOUR STAFF, CAMP COMMANDER. LET THEM ALL DIE, IT WOULD BE THE SAME TO ME.

THE MAN WE SEEK. OR MEN, IF HE HAD CONFEDERATES. ARE THEY DEAD?

CHHHHH!

HOW CAN I SAY, HERR BARON? YOU GAVE US NO WAY TO IDENTIFY HIM, SO HE MIGHT BE ANY OF —

SILENCE. MÜLLER?

IT IS AS YOU SUSPECTED, HERR BARON. WE HAVE PERFORMED AUGURIES, AND THERE ARE MAGICAL RESIDUES — THE MAN YOU SEEK WAS HERE.

HE IS NOT AMONG THE DEAD.

AND?

OR THE RECAPTURED.

THEN WHAT USE ARE YOU TO ME, IF YOU CAN ONLY IDENTIFY HIM ONCE HE'S GONE?

H-HERR BARON, WE CAN STILL —

NEVER MIND. INEPTITUDE FROM THE CRUX IS SADLY PREDICTABLE —

– AND I HAVE MADE OTHER ARRANGEMENTS.

HRRR...

GOTT –

TIBOR. SPEAK.

SANCTE TUITIO –

AS YOU COMMAND, DARK ONE.

THE ERD-GRIMMEN YOU SET BENEATH THE CAMP PURSUED TWO MEN, WHO FLED TO THE WOODS, NOT THE AIR.

ONE OF THEM WIELDED CONJURE-ARTS.

THE GRIMMEN LOST THE TRAIL, AND HAVE BEEN UNABLE TO REACQUIRE IT.

IS THAT ALL?

NO. THE TWO TRAVELED NORTH AND EAST.

THAT IS ALL.

HM.

Tssssss...

NORTH AND EAST. TOWARD COBURG. THAT IS... NOT GOOD.

ESPECIALLY IF THESE FOOLS ARE CORRECT ABOUT WHO THEY WERE.

FOLLOW. FIND THEIR TRAIL.

AS YOU COMMAND, DARK ONE.

YOU WILL HEAR FROM US IN THE USUAL WAYS.

LET IT BE SOON, TIBOR.

THE LUPA, HERR BARON?

YOU RISK YOUR SOUL, DEALING WITH CREATURES OF THE PIT.

FAR TOO LATE FOR THAT, YOUNG HUBER.

BUT THE LUPA ARE USEFUL, AT LEAST FOR NOW. WHEN THE OLD ORDER IS RESTORED, HOWEVER...

...POWER WILL BE BACK IN THE HANDS OF THOSE BORN TO WIELD IT.

AND THEN THE LUPA, AND THOSE LIKE THEM, WILL RELEARN THEIR PROPER PLACE.

Hssss...

Near Salgen, Occupied Swabia.

North and east.

I woke alone.

Guy had not returned during the night, as far as I could tell...

... and Erna was gone.

It bothered me, what we'd done last night. It seemed... wrong, somehow. Shallow, cheap. But then...

... that's not something I needed to know.

Huuuuuu—

... it felt like the whole world was cheap, lately. Like we'd lost something that mattered. Or something had gone sour.

Erna had cried out for "Stefan" last night. I didn't know who that was. A lost husband? A lover? But I guess...

Whatever Erna felt she'd needed from me, I hope she got it.

All I could do was get dressed...

... and hope there was coffee in the supplies she'd left.

WELL, FLETCHER.

I TRUST YOU HAD A *GOOD NIGHT.*

AND I TRUST YOU REMEMBERED TO CAST THE *ANTI-DISEASE* SPELLS YOU WERE TAUGHT IN TRAINING. DON'T WANT ANY UNWELCOME *SOUVENIRS,* HM?

WHAT?!

YOU THINK THAT'S *FUNNY?* YOU ENJOYING YOUR *LITTLE JOKE,* LEAVING ME WITH HER WITHOUT SAYING A *WORD?*

NOW, *LAD —*

SHE HELPED *SAVE OUR LIVES,* GUY. AND SHE'S BEEN THROUGH *A LOT!*

YOU THINK IT'S OKAY TO JUST...*SNIGGER* AT HER LIKE THAT? AND AT *ME?*

WHOA, WHOA. I MEANT NO *INSULT.*

PERHAPS I *SHOULD HAVE* TOLD YOU ABOUT HER, BUT I THOUGHT IT MIGHT... *COMPLICATE* THINGS.

YOU DID THE *RIGHT THING,* SLEEPING WITH HER —

— IT'S WHAT SHE *WANTS,* WHICH MAKES IT MORE LIKELY SHE'LL STAY SILENT, KEEP OUR *PRESENCE HERE* TO HERSELF.

THAT DOESN'T MAKE IT ANY BETTER. SHE'S A SAD, TROUBLED, *WOUNDED* GIRL —

— BUT TO YOU, SHE'S SOMEONE TO *MANAGE,* TO *USE.*

LIKE YOU'RE USING ME. LIKE YOU USED THE *MEN* YOU SENT TO THEIR *DEATHS* LAST NIGHT.

I DID WHAT IT TOOK TO GET THE ***JOB*** DONE.

COFFEE'S READY. THAT'LL PERK YOU UP.

IT'LL TAKE MORE THAN THAT BEFORE I LIKE ***ANY*** OF THIS.

YOU'RE PRETTY ***COLD,*** GUY.

NEVER MIND ***ERNA,*** THOSE MEN WERE OUR FRIENDS. OUR ***BROTHERS.*** AND YOU SENT THEM TO DIE WITHOUT ***WARNING...***

SOME OF THOSE MEN WE BROKE OUT WILL ***ESCAPE.*** SOME WILL BE ***RECAPTURED.*** AND YES, MANY WILL ***DIE.***

BUT THEY'RE ***SOLDIERS,*** FLETCHER. THEY SIGNED UP FOR THIS. TO GIVE THEIR ***LIVES,*** IF THEY MUST, FOR THEIR NATIONS, THEIR ***CAUSE.***

IS OUR MISSION ***REALLY*** WORTH ALL THOSE LIVES?

ALL OF THEM AND ***MORE,*** YES.

THEIR LIVES, YOURS, MINE, WHATEVER IT ***TAKES.***

JUST WHAT ***IS*** THIS MISSION?

I KNOW THE ***BIG PICTURE,*** BUT FOR THE REST, I'LL NEED YOUR CHIPS.

CAN'T KNOW WHERE WE'RE HEADED NEXT WITHOUT THE PLANS ***ENSPELLED*** ON THEM, AFTER ALL.

OTHER THAN THAT IT'LL INVOLVE ***TROLLS.***

YEAH, YEAH.

It felt strange, giving my orichalc chips away.

I'd just gotten them back, and they're personal. Still, it's why I was here.

He muttered some words I didn't catch. A retrieval spell, I'd guess. And –

RIGHT...

RIGHT...

DAMN.

WHAT? WHAT *IS* IT?

IT'S *TIME*, LAD. WE DON'T HAVE *MUCH* OF IT.

WE HAVE TO GET MOVING, *NOW.* MAKE SOME *SPEED.*

I'LL DOUSE THE *FIRE.* HOP TO.

I WANT TO KNOW *MORE* THAN THAT.

WHY ARE WE –

TELL ME, LIEUTENANT ARROWSMITH...

...I DON'T KNOW HOW YOU YANKS *DO* IT, BUT IN YOUR TRAINING, WAS THERE A BIT ABOUT *FOLLOWING ORDERS?*

RIGHT, SIR. *SORRY,* SIR.

But I wasn't going to leave it at that.

Either he'd tell me...

CRRT CRRT?

THAT'S RIGHT, HILDA.

TIME TO *FLY.*

... or I'd find out some other way.

At that moment, though, he wanted us moving.

So we moved.

We stayed in among the trees as much as we could, so we wouldn't be spotted.

KA-KA!

But even so, Hilda was glad to be back together, back flying, after she'd hidden so long near the camp...

... and even if I didn't feel good about it too, her joy filtered through the flight spell to me.

TRRT TRRT...

HA! WHO'S A GOOD GIRL, HILDA?

WHO'S A GOOD GIRL?

SILENTLY. SILENTLY! YOU NEVER KNOW WHAT MIGHT BE LISTENING —

— PARTICULARLY IN WOODS AS OLD AS THESE!

And just like that, I was nervous...

... and that flowed back to Hilda.

So on we flew. Quietly.

Because you never know.

I sure didn't, at least. I didn't even know what to watch out for.

Eventually, we stopped for a meal. Erna had supplied us with fishhooks and line...

The dragonets could forage for waterbugs and whatever else they could find...

FLETCHER. I APOLOGIZE FOR EARLIER — I SHOULDN'T HAVE BEEN SO **BRUSQUE.**

THIS MISSION'S WEIGHING PRETTY **HEAVILY** ON ME.

HOW **SO?**

I MEAN, I **UNDERSTAND** IT'S IMPORTANT. BUT IF YOU WON'T TELL ME **WHY,** I'M KIND OF LOST, YOU KNOW?

THAT'S FAIR. TELL ME, THEN. WHAT DO YOU KNOW ABOUT THE **PEACE OF CHARLEMAGNE?**

THAT'S WHEN WE MADE A PACT WITH THE **LIGHTBORN,** RIGHT?

AND **MAGIC** BECAME PART OF OUR WORLD?

YOU LEARNED THAT IN **SCHOOL?**

IT'S **CLOSE ENOUGH,** I SUPPOSE. BUT THERE ARE **STRICT RULES** TO THE PACT...

...MYSTIC BARRIERS TO KEEP HUMANS OUT OF THE **EVENING LANDS,** LEST UNWARY TRAVELERS GO MAD IN THE **OUTER MARCHES.**

BUT YOU ALREADY KNOW **THAT.**

THAT'S WHERE WE WERE **YESTERDAY,** AFTER ESCAPING THE CAMP.

YES.

BUT *NOW...*

NOW THE *ALLIED POWERS* ARE NEGOTIATING WITH THE LIGHTBORN'S *SEELIE COURT.* FOR SAFE PASSAGE *THROUGH* THE MARCHES.

"*THINK* ABOUT IT. THROUGH THE MARCHES, OUR ARMIES COULD REACH *ANYWHERE.* AND NOTHING COULD *STOP THEM.*

"WALK INTO THE MARCHES IN *LONDON,* COME OUT IN PRUSSIA. OR *TYROLIA-HUNGARY.*

"WE COULD SIMPLY *BYPASS* ALL THEIR DEFENSES AND STRIKE AT THE HEART OF THE EMPIRE ITSELF."

THAT... THAT COULD *END* THE *WAR.*

IN *DAYS.*

IT COULD SAVE *MILLIONS* OF LIVES.

THE SEELIE COURT DOESN'T *LIKE* THE IDEA. HUMAN SOLDIERS IN THEIR LANDS, IT'S NOT SOMETHING THEY'VE *EVER* PERMITTED BEFORE.

BUT THEY HAVEN'T SAID *NO.*

THE CENTRAL POWERS, THOUGH, *FOUND OUT* ABOUT THE TALKS...

...AND THEY TOOK A *HOSTAGE.*

DRSHH VAL

HERE...

...TAKE A *LOOK.*

HER NAME'S *LYRAELI.* SHE'S THE THIRD DAUGHTER OF A...WELL, I GUESS IT'S A *MIDDLING* RULING FAMILY OF THE LIGHTBORN.

SHE'S SUPPOSED TO BE ON A TOUR OF THE *CORAL REACHES,* A DISTANT PART OF HER PARENTS' *KINGDOM.*

BUT SHE'S NOT. THE TYROLIANS HAVE HER *LOCKED UP* SOMEWHERE.

A — A *PRINCESS?* H-HOW CAN THEY —

SHE'S SO —

SHE'S —

WATCH *OUT* FOR THAT, LAD.

IT'S LIGHTBORN *GLAMOUR* — DON'T LET IT *GET TO YOU.*

PLSHH

YOU ALL RIGHT? NOT TOO ***SPELLBLIND?*** YOU GET ***USED*** TO IT AFTER A WHILE, YOU CAN HOLD IT AT ***BAY.***

I'M... OKAY.

BUT ALL THIS — IT'S SO ***STRANGE.*** NOTHING I EVER THOUGHT I'D EVEN ***SEE,*** MUCH LESS BE ***PART OF.***

BUT YOU'RE SO... ***CASUAL*** ABOUT IT.

I'M NOT ***REMOTELY*** CASUAL ABOUT IT. IT'S ***DANGEROUS.*** IT'S MADNESS. ***CALAMITOUS*** MADNESS. IF THE SEELIE COURT ***LEARNS*** SHE WAS TAKEN —

— THEY COULD DESTROY ***EVERYONE*** — ON ***BOTH SIDES*** — IN THEIR ***ANGER.***

OUR JOB IS TO ***GET HER BACK,*** GET HER ***FREE,*** BEFORE ANYONE ***REALIZES*** SHE'S GONE. IF WE ***RETURN*** HER, IT COULD SWAY THE COURT ***TO*** US.

IF WE CAN'T, WELL, THEY'LL BLAME ***ALL HUMANITY.*** AND IF SHE DIES —

— I DON'T WANT TO ***THINK*** ABOUT HOW BAD IT'LL BE IF SHE ***DIES.***

THE ***TROLLS*** ARE OUR WAY TO FIND HER, BECAUSE THEIR MOUNTAIN TROLLHOMES EXIST ***BETWEEN*** OUR WORLD AND THE EVENING LANDS...

...GIVING THEM A FOOT IN ***EACH REALM.***

THE TROLLS DON'T ***LIKE*** THE CENTRAL POWERS. BUT THEY DON'T MUCH LIKE ***US,*** EITHER.

THEY JUST WANT TO BE ***LEFT ALONE.***

THAT'S WHERE ***YOU*** COME IN.

ME? LISTEN, I KNOW ***ONE TROLL —***

YOU *GREW UP* WITH THIS SGT. RAKMA — RAKHMATTA —

ROCKY. AND IT WASN'T EVEN A *YEAR.*

HE CAME TO WORK FOR MY *DAD* AFTER THE PRUSSIANS INVADED LOTHARINGIA. WE'RE *FRIENDS,* BUT I'M NO TROLL EXPERT OR ANYTHING.

YES, WELL. SEE *THESE?*

THEY'RE *SIGILS OF INTRODUCTION.* FROM THE TROLLS OF *SCOTIA.*

BUT AS I SAID, TROLLS DON'T GENERALLY *CARE* FOR HUMANS MUCH. A FRIENDSHIP LIKE YOURS IS *RARE.*

MOST HUMANS THINK TROLLS HIDE UNDER BRIDGES. *EAT* PEOPLE. OR AT BEST, THEY THINK TROLLS ARE *STUPID.*

THEY'RE NOT. AND THEY *DON'T!* THEY JUST —

AND, AH, WHERE *DID* YOU GROW UP? I KNOW YOU'RE NO ORDINARY FLIER — I'VE NEVER *SEEN* ANYONE WHO CAN DO THE THINGS YOU CAN.

WHAT, THEY DIDN'T *TELL* YOU?

I KNOW. BUT I NEED YOU ALONG TO KEEP ME FROM PUTTING MY *FOOT* IN IT. I HAVE *NO EXPERIENCE* WITH TROLLS. THERE *WERE* NONE WHERE I GREW UP.

SO FORGIVE ME IF I'M RUDE, BUT — WHO *ARE* YOU, ANYWAY?

NO, NO, OF *COURSE* THEY WOULDN'T HAVE.

LET ME *INTRODUCE* MYSELF, THEN.

I'M *CLARENCE GUY GORDON HADDON.* COLONEL IN THE *ROYAL ALBIONESE INTELLIGENCE CORPS* AND SEVENTH *DUKE* OF *CLARE.*

AND, NOT *QUITE* INCIDENTALLY, THE ILLEGITIMATE ELDEST SON OF *ALBERT VICTOR...*

...BY THE GRACE OF GOD *KING* OF THE *GRAND DOMINION OF ALBION* AND THE *FOUR CELTIC NATIONS...*

...AND OF HIS *REALMS* BEYOND THE SEAS, *EMPEROR* OF HINDUSTAN AND *DEFENDER OF THE FAITH.*

YOU'RE — A *PRINCE?*

NOT *QUITE.*

=WHEET= *BRITOMART!*

THE PLAN IN YOUR CHIPS TELLS ME WHERE WE GO *NEXT,* BUT ALSO THAT SOMEONE'S BEEN LEAKING *INFORMATION* TO THE CRUX.

A FEW MORE *DAYS* IN THAT CAMP...

...AND THEY'D HAVE *FOUND ME OUT,* OR KILLED *EVERYONE* THERE JUST TO GET ME.

AS THINGS WORKED OUT, THEY'LL KNOW SOON ENOUGH THAT *MILD, FRIENDLY* GUY DAVIES WAS SNOOPING ABOUT FOR A WAY TO FIND *LYRAELI...*

...AND THEY'LL STOP AT NOTHING TO KILL THE *BOTH* OF US.

LET'S NOT MAKE IT *TOO* EASY.

UH, YEAH. *RIGHT!*

For the rest of the day, my head was in a whirl. Guy was royalty? Or whatever illegitimate sons of kings are?

He didn't seem like a prince. He seemed — ordinary. Aside from being able to send men to die without blinking, I guess.

But I guess he had reasons for that.

That night, we were both exhausted. Our dragonets too — we'd flown as hard as they could bear.

Guy and Britomart were asleep in minutes.

I could feel how tired Hilda was, too. But I just couldn't nod off like that.

I kept thinking about Rocky. And home, wondering how everyone there was. And about everything that had happened...

... and how a blacksmith's kid from the shores of Lake Erie could be here with an Albionese Duke, off to rescue a Lightborn princess.

PLRRRT PRRRT

AW, HILDA. YOU'RE THE BEST. YOU'RE THE BEST...

I slept, eventually...

But even that felt strange. It was like...

... like I was hearing voices in my dreams all night. A deep, booming voice from far away...

... and a voice I knew, but it wasn't speaking a language I knew...

Over the next few days, we kept moving, staying out of sight as much as we could. Staying out of open sky.

Sometimes there was no way to go, though, that didn't take us near a town...

... and then he'd get even more cautious.

HOLD *UP*, LAD.

He'd draw sigils in the air again. But not like troll signs. More elegant, sinuous.

IT'S ALL RIGHT. NO WIZARDS IN *RESIDENCE.*

THEY MUST BE *CONSCRIPTING* THEM ALL.

BUT STAY NEAR THE TREES *ANYWAY.*

I CAN ONLY *MASK* OUR PRESENCE SO MUCH.

SO, ALL THIS *MAGIC* YOU CAN DO. *EARTHQUAKES,* RAIN, FLYING US RIGHT INTO THE *OUTER MARCHES* LIKE THAT.

DO THEY TEACH *ALL* PRINCES THAT SORT OF THING?

PFF.

I'M NO *PRINCE.* I'M AN *EMBARRASS-MENT.*

HM?

TOO MANY BASTARD PRINCES HAVE ***GATHERED ARMIES,*** TRIED TO TAKE THEIR BIRTHRIGHT BY ***FORCE.*** SAFEST ALL AROUND TO JUST KILL THEM ***YOUNG.***

MY FATHER, THANKFULLY, DIDN'T WANT TO ***DO*** THAT. BUT HE CAN'T REALLY MAKE ME AN ***HEIR,*** EITHER.

SO I GET HANDED A ***MINOR DUKEDOM,*** GET SCHOOLED IN POLITICS AND MAGIC — AND THEN SENT OFF ON ***DANGEROUS MISSIONS.***

IF THE FAMILY'S LUCKY, MAYBE I'LL ***DIE*** ON ONE OF THEM.

THEN... WHY ***DO*** THIS? WHY DO ***ANY*** OF IT?

KEEPS ME ***ALIVE,*** AT LEAST PRECARIOUSLY.

AND IT'S NOT ***SO*** BAD BEING A ROYAL BASTARD. I HAVE A FEW ***INBORN ADVANTAGES*** THAT COME IN HANDY.

WHAT HAVE THEY ***TAUGHT*** YOU ABOUT HOW MAGIC WORKS?

THEY DIDN'T BRING UP ***NOBLESSE OBLIGE?*** HOW MAGIC FLOWS, HOW IT ***BINDS?***

...NO?

NOT MUCH.

JUST, YOU KNOW. THE TWELVE ***BASIC SPELLS*** OF AN AIRMAN. THERE WASN'T ***TIME*** FOR MORE THAN THAT.

ALL RIGHT. ***LESSON ONE,*** THEN:

MAGIC FLOWS FROM THE ***LAND.*** THE LAND, THE ***PEOPLE,*** THE PLANTS AND ANIMALS. AND IT FLOWS ***TO*** THOSE WHO RULE, THOSE SWORN TO ***SERVE.***

THAT'S HOW IT WAS WITH THE GREAT ***HERZE-KINGS,*** LIKE ARTHUR. ALL THE POWER OF ***ALBION*** FLOWED INTO HIM, AND HE ***PROTECTED US*** IN RETURN.

IN TIME, THOUGH, THAT POWER'S BEEN ***SHARED.*** WITH ***DUKES,*** COUNTS, BARONS...EVEN ***MAYORS.*** OR ADEPTS LIKE ***YOU,*** AS NEEDED.

AND ***PRIESTS,*** BUT THAT'S A DIFFERENT STRUCTURE.

"I WAS BORN IN ***HINDUSTAN,*** AND INVESTED IN POWER THERE, AS ONE OF ***NOBLE BLOOD*** IN THE EMPIRE, AND FROM BEING ***BORN*** TO THAT SOIL.

"THAT BOND WAS ***STRENGTHENED,*** WHEN I WAS YOUNG.

"BUT WHEN I WAS MADE A ***DUKE*** I WAS BOUND TO CLARE AND ***HER*** PEOPLE...

"...AND IN ***LONDON*** TO ALBION AND THE EMPIRE. FROM ***ALL*** THOSE PLACES, I DRAW ***POWER.*** AND WITH IT COMES A DUTY TO ***SERVE*** THOSE LANDS.

"BUT MY FATHER WAS ***ALBERT VICTOR...***

"...SO MY GRANDFATHER WAS ***ALBERT OF SAXE-COBURG-GOTHA,*** HUSBAND AND CONSORT TO ***VICTORIA,*** WHO HAD ROOTS IN ***HANNOVER.***

"THAT GIVES ME ROOTS IN THE ***HEART*** OF PRUSSIA, FROM ***TWO BLOODLINES.***"

THAT GIVES ME DEEP MAGIC TO DRAW ON EVEN ***HERE,*** DEEP IN ENEMY TERRITORY.

THAT WAS HOW I COULD CALL ON THE ***LAND*** TO SHAKE AND THE ***SKIES*** TO ROIL INTO STORM, TO COVER OUR ESCAPE.

WOW.

THERE'S ***DIFFERENT*** MAGIC IN DIFFERENT ***PLACES?*** PRUSSIA? INDIA? BUT...

...THEN WHAT IS IT ***I*** HAVE?

HNH.

YOU HAVE MORE THAN YOU ***KNOW,*** YOUNG FLETCHER. BUT I'LL SAVE THAT FOR LESSON ***TWO.***

THE TROUBLE IS, BECAUSE I ***CALLED ON*** THOSE MAGICS, THEY'LL BE ABLE TO ***SEE*** THAT, IF THEY HAVE THE SKILL. AND THEY ***DO.***

SO THEY'LL ***KNOW*** IT WAS ME.

THAT'S PARTLY WHY I WANTED TO ***MOVE*** SO FAST.

I'M CONFIDENT ***NOW,*** THOUGH, THAT THEY'VE LOST OUR TRAIL. SO WE CAN STOP ***LOOKING BACK...***

...AND START LOOKING ***AHEAD.***

TO WHAT'LL HAPPEN IF WE DON'T FIND LYRAELI IN ***TIME?***

Tsss...

EXACTLY.

SO LET'S GET ON A LITTLE ***FURTHER*** BEFORE FULL DARK.

It was a lot to take in, a lot to think about. Still, it was good to be able to relax a little...

...now that I knew we weren't being followed anymore.

SNFF

HRR

HRRR...

CHAPTER FIVE

Trollhome

It is sunny and pleasant, the air cool and the water warm and relaxing.

The water sprite's name is Ourlourlu, or something very like it. She and her sisters delight in play and frolic.

They were once nervous when humans were near, but this one is different. They have grown used to him, over time.

Sometimes Ourlourlu and her sisters have long conversations with him.

And the man...

FLETCHER?

WOHER KOMMST DU, FLETCHER?

BHUH!

WH-WHAT —

WOHER KOMMST DU, FLETCHER? WO WURDEST DU GEBOREN?

STAMMST DU AUS ALBION? GALLIEN VIELLEICHT? BIST DU PREUSSE?

WOHER KOMMST DU, FLETCHER? WO WURDEST DU GEBOREN?

UH?

ICH KOMME AUS CONNECTICUT? AUS DEN VEREINIGTEN STAATEN VON COLUMBIA?

WELL, THEN. THE ***LANGUAGE SPELLS*** ARE TAKING ROOT, I SEE. GOOD.

WH...?

WELL, I'LL BE ***DAMNED***.

I didn't know if Guy chose to cast the spells on me while I slept because he liked seeing me bewildered, or if it was something else.

He said they worked better that way...

... but I wasn't so sure.

He'd been close-mouthed for the whole mission. Sure, it was a secret mission, but I was part of it. Didn't I have a right to know?

Also, he'd interrupted my dream.

AH, HERE WE ARE.

It wasn't the first time I'd dreamed of that old man, and I felt like I should know more about him, somehow.

And on top of that, he seemed like he was in a good mood, which for some reason felt even more suspicious...

WHAT, WE'RE HERE?

WHERE'S ***HERE?***

JUST ***REIN IN*** A MOMENT, YOUNG FLETCHER...

AAAAAAAND...

The Oberwald Trollhome.

Baden-Württemberg, Occupied Swabia.

...I BELIEVE THE CORRECT PHRASE IS *"HEY, PRESTO,"* IS IT NOT?

IT'S —

IT JUST —

CRIIIK

HNH. IT IS YOU, THEN.

COME IN, SWIFTLY. IT IS BAD FOR THE GATES TO BE VISIBLE IN DAYLIGHT.

Apparently, the trollhomes were magically hidden from ordinary sight, except when needed, to avoid the eyes of humans.

I can't say I blame them, really.

THIS WAY. I WILL TAKE YOU TO THE KING.

It was amazing. I'd never thought what a trollhome was like, never even imagined it. And if I had, I couldn't have come up with this.

It was chilly, though. I suppose they didn't mind that. And the king...

WE WERE TOLD YOU WOULD COME. AND WE WERE TOLD IT WAS OF GRAVE IMPORTANCE.

SO WE WILL HELP YOU.

... he was a little chilly, too.

BUT THEN YOU WILL LEAVE. AND YOU WILL NOT RETURN.

NOT VERY *FRIENDLY*, WAS HE?

NOW YOU SEE WHY THE WAR OFFICE THOUGHT I COULD USE SOME *HELP*, HM?

COME THIS WAY NOW. I WILL SHOW YOU TO YOUR CHAMBERS. FOOD FOR MEN WILL BE BROUGHT TO YOU AS WELL.

They didn't want us there.

But still...

...it was a wonder to see it.

To see how they worked, how they lived.

To feel the moist air, from all that water and stone.

Their...gods?

Or maybe ancestors?

I had no way of knowing.

IN HERE.

YOU ARE NOT CONFINED AND MAY GO WHERE YOU WILL. ALL PRIVATE PLACES ARE LOCKED.

THANK YOU, MISTER, AH...?

SLMM

The chamber wasn't built to human scale, as you'd expect. But it was as cool and damp as the main halls, and the air was fresh.

There must have been hidden shafts to the outside.

WELL.

There was a kind of light everywhere, though I didn't know where it came from.

I HOPE IT WON'T COME TO ***THAT.***

IF YOU SEE ME DOING SOMETHING ***STUPID,*** OR ***UNDERSTAND*** SOMETHING I DON'T, LET ME KNOW.

AND THIS IS WHAT I'M SUPPOSED TO...WHAT, ***GUIDE*** YOU ***THROUGH?***

Maybe that was just for us, too.

I hoped the beds were more comfortable than they looked.

HM.

Later, Guy went over our orders again, respelled on my orichalc flyers' chips...

SC'S P'ADH'N

It wasn't as interesting as it might sound.

The troll who'd brought us here said we could go where we wanted. He didn't sound happy about it...

...but I figured that as long as I could find my way back...

... I could look around a little.

And surprisingly, for the first time since I'd left Montdidier, maybe longer...

... I felt a little like I was at home.

It was the evening hours...

... and the trolls were doing their nightly rituals.

It took me back to when Gretchen and I would watch Rocky do the very same rituals, in his place behind our smithy.

It was a way to bless and thank their gods, he said.

We watched so often, I think I could do them in my sleep.

Rocky's gods might be gone now, at least some of them. But still, they thanked and blessed them. And me...

...I started to think about all Rocky had given up.

This is what he'd left behind.

To come to the States, to work for my father.

It must have been such a massive change for him, to build a new life among humans. And then to come back, to go to war...

GUY.

I HAD A FEW ***QUESTIONS*** I WANTED TO ASK, IF YOU'VE GOT A LITTLE TIME.

FIRE AWAY.

WHAT WE'RE DOING — TRYING TO RESCUE A ***LIGHTBORN PRINCESS*** OF THE EVENING LANDS — IT'S GOT ME THINKING.

THE ***EVENING LANDS*** — I'VE HEARD ABOUT THEM ALL MY LIFE. BUT IN THE OLD STORIES, THEY'RE SOMETIMES CALLED THE ***SUNLIT LANDS,*** RIGHT?

ARE THOSE — ARE THEY THE ***SAME PLACE?***

WELL, THEY ARE...AND THEY ***AREN'T.*** WHY?

THERE'S A LOT I ***DON'T KNOW,*** AND MAYBE THAT'S HOW IT SHOULD BE. BUT I'D LIKE TO KNOW ***SOMETHING.***

THAT MAKES ***SENSE.***

SO. THE ***PEACE OF CHARLEMAGNE*** AGAIN.

THAT'S WHEN THE ***LIGHTBORN*** — AND OTHERS — SET UP ***DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS*** WITH US, AND WE STARTED TRADING OPENLY.

BUT THAT'S JUST ***WHEN.*** DID YOU LEARN MUCH ABOUT ***WHY?***

WHAT, IN SCHOOL?

BACK IN ***HERBERTSVILLE,*** WE MOSTLY LEARNED ABOUT THE ***COLUMBIAN REVOLUTION*** AND THE ***HARDY PIONEERS.*** WORLD HISTORY WAS...SKIMPY.

LOOKS LIKE IT'S TIME FOR ***ANOTHER LESSON,*** THEN.

"WHEN CHARLEMAGNE WAS ***KING OF THE GAULS,*** HE SET HIS CAPITAL AT ***AACHEN.*** MOST PEOPLE THOUGHT IT WAS FOR THE HOT SPRINGS...

"...BUT IT WAS ***MORE*** THAN THAT."

"THE ***BORDERS*** BETWEEN OUR WORLDS AND WHAT WAS CALLED THE SUNLIT LANDS THEN ARE ***THIN*** IN PLACES. INCLUDING AACHEN.

"AND CHARLEMAGNE WAS ***FASCINATED*** BY THE LIGHTBORN.

"HE WANTED TO ***MEET*** THEM, LEARN MORE ABOUT THEM, TO ***UNDERSTAND*** HOW THEY THOUGHT..."

AND HE...COMMUNED WITH ***WATER SPRITES*** THERE? A ***HEAVYSET*** MAN, LONG WHITE HAIR AND BEARD, BUT ***BALD*** ON TOP?

THAT'S VERY ***SPECIFIC,*** FLETCH.

IF YOU DIDN'T LEARN IT IN SCHOOL, YOU READ ABOUT HIM ***SOMEWHERE,*** RIGHT?

NO. BUT I THINK I'VE BEEN ***DREAMING*** ABOUT HIM, ESPECIALLY THE LAST COUPLE OF NIGHTS. HIM ***AND*** THE SPRITES.

THAT'S ***EXTREMELY*** INTERESTING, LAD...

...AND MAYBE A BIT ***TROUBLING.***

TROUBLING? ***WHY?***

IT'S ***COMPLICATED.*** LET ME THINK ABOUT THAT A LITTLE.

IN THE MEANTIME, BACK TO ***AACHEN.***

"IN ***800 A.D.,*** CHARLEMAGNE LEFT AACHEN WITH AN ARMY. POPE ***LEO III,*** IN ROME, WAS UNDER ASSAULT BY FOLLOWERS OF THE PREVIOUS POPE...

"...AND CHARLEMAGNE SET OUT TO ***DEFEND*** HIM."

And on his travels, Charlemagne saw things that caused him to wax most wroth. And to raise his sword, and that of his personal guard, in the cause of justice.

For in those days, Lightborn peddlers were known, at times, in smaller villages and hamlets, where they would ply their wares to hedge-witches and the like. But in larger towns and cities, some heeded those in the Church who denounced the Lightborn as demons...

...and sought to drive them out or kill them.

But the great king knew they brought no harm. And when he saw a small Lightborn family assailed...

...he fought in their defense.

So it was, that when Charlemagne rescued the Pope from his assailants as well, he was blessed and made emperor of the Roman lands...

...but not blessed by Rome alone.

Oberon and Titania, the rulers of the Sunlit Lands, appeared by great magic in the midst of the ceremony...

...and they brought the new emperor a blessing of their own.

For Charlemagne's kindness to the oakling peddler, who was a particular favorite of Oberon's, and for his other kindnesses to the Lightborn peoples through the years...

...they named him a favored ally of the Seelie Court.

And they decreed that henceforth, through Charlemagne and his successors, diplomatic relations would be opened between his world and theirs...

...and a lasting friendship forged between their peoples.

...AND THAT'S HOW CHARLEMAGNE BECAME A ***HERZE-KING,*** WITH MUCH OF EUROPE AS HIS DOMINION. THE FIRST HERZE-KING IN ***CENTURIES.***

SO IT WAS THE ***SEELIE COURT*** WHO LET HIM DRAW ON THE POWER OF THE LAND, LETTING HIM WORK MAGIC?

THE LAND AND THE ***PEOPLE,*** YES. HERZE-KINGS WERE ***RARE,*** EARLIER — THERE WAS ***ARTHUR*** OF ALBION AND BEFORE HIM ***PELLAS*** OF ATLANTIS —

— BUT IN CHARLEMAGNE'S WAKE THERE WERE OTHERS, LIKE ***BARBAROSSA.*** IT WAS ***THEY*** WHO MADE THAT POWER — *PRANA* — FLOW AS IT DOES TODAY.

OKAY, I ***GET*** THAT, I THINK. BUT —

BUT WHAT DOES THIS HAVE TO DO WITH THE ***EVENING LANDS?***

AS THE ***BLOODLINES*** OF THE GREAT HERZE-KINGS SPREAD DOWN THROUGH ***GENERATIONS,*** THEIR ABILITY TO WIELD *PRANA* SPREAD, TOO.

SOME, LIKE THE CRUX, SAY IT WAS ***DILUTED,*** AND HAS CAUSED THE ***CORRUPTION*** AND ***DOWNFALL*** OF THE GREAT EMPIRES...

...BECAUSE THEY THINK MAGIC SHOULD BE JUST FOR THE ***CHURCH?***

MAYBE THE CHURCH AND ITS CLOSEST ***ALLIES,*** BUT YES.

OTHERS, THOUGH, SAY THAT THE MORE WHO WIELD POWER, THE ***FAIRER*** THE WORLD AND THE MORE ***EQUAL*** ITS CITIZENS.

WHO'S ***RIGHT?*** I DON'T KNOW.

BUT HERE'S WHERE WE GET BACK TO YOUR ***QUESTION.***

AS THE AMOUNT OF ***PRANA*** BEING USED ***GREW*** IN OUR WORLD, IT BEGAN TO ***FADE*** IN THE SUNLIT LANDS. MAYBE OBERON AND TITANIA DIDN'T REALIZE.

MAYBE THEY DID. THEY'VE ***ALWAYS*** HAD PLANS WE KNOW NOTHING ABOUT.

WHATEVER. THE SUNLIT LANDS ***DIMINISHED,*** AND BECAME THE ***EVENING LANDS.*** SOME OF THE LIGHTBORN GREW ***HOSTILE*** TO HUMANITY...

...OR JUST ***TURNED AWAY.***

AND THERE'LL BE A ***NIGHTFALL*** FOR THEM SOMETIME. BUT WHAT THAT MEANS FOR THEM — AND FOR ***US*** — NOBODY KNOWS.

THAT'S — THAT'S —

WHY DO THINGS HAVE TO ***CHANGE*** LIKE THAT? EVERYTHING SEEMS TO BE ***FALLING APART.*** EVERYTHING'S A MESS.

AND IT ONLY EVER SEEMS TO GET ***WORSE.***

SHIPS TRAVEL SWIFTLY ACROSS THE OCEANS NOW. ***MEDICINES*** SAVE PEOPLE WHO'D HAVE DIED BEFORE. YOU CAN ***FLY.***

YES, BUT —

THINGS ***ALWAYS*** CHANGE, FLETCHER. IT'S THE WAY OF THE ***WORLD.***

IT'S HOW WE ***REACT*** TO THE CHANGES, WHAT WE ***MAKE*** OF THEM — THAT'S WHAT TRULY ***MATTERS.***

NOW GET SOME ***SLEEP.*** TOMORROW'S GOING TO BE A BIG DAY.

What he'd told me was a lot to take in. I tried to sleep...

...but I felt restless. And when I finally nodded off, morning came...

...and we were summoned by the troll king's wizards.

IF IT WON'T TRIGGER AN EXPLANATION AS LONG AS THE ONE *LAST NIGHT*...

...WHAT ARE THEY *DOING?*

I TOLD YOU BEFORE, THE TROLLHOMES ARE BUILT HALFWAY IN *OUR* WORLD AND HALF IN THE *EVENING LANDS.* MAYBE YOU *FELT* THAT, WHILE YOU SLEPT?

ANYWAY, BECAUSE OF THEIR UNIQUE *LOCATION,* THEIR SPELLS CAN REACH INTO LIGHTBORN REALMS IN WAYS OURS *CAN'T* —

— WHICH MIGHT LET THEM DISCOVER WHERE THE PRINCESS IS, HELP US *FIND* HER MORE SWIFTLY.

IF THEY *CAN*...

AH! WE HAVE FOUND HER! STEP FORWARD AND SEE!

YOUR FOES MUST BE MAD, FOR SHE IS INDEED IMPRISONED. AND FROM WHAT WE CAN SEE...

...IS NOT FIT FOR ***BARNYARD ANIMALS,*** MUCH LESS A BEING OF EVEN ***MEAGER*** RANK! TAKE THIS SWILL ***AWAY,*** JAILERS...

...AND ***BRING*** ***ME SOM***

PERHAPS YOU IMAGINE YOURSELF IN YOUR ***FATHER'S HALLS,*** CODDLED ONE. ...T YOU ARE ...T.

...SHE DOES NOT SEEM TO BE HAPPY.

...AT ... YOU ARE ***GIVEN*** ...AT, OR YOU MAY ...O ***HUNGRY,*** AS YOU CHOOSE.

IT IS ALL THE SAME TO ***US.***

THEY — THEY CAN'T TREAT HER LIKE THAT!

IT'S NOT RIGHT — NOT FAIR!

WHERE IS SHE? WHAT DID YOU FIND OUT?!

CALM YOURSELF, MANLING.

IT IS NOT WE WHO HAVE EARNED YOUR ANGER. IF INDEED IT IS EARNED.

SHE IS MANY OF YOUR MILES FROM HERE, TO THE EAST...

...AND SOME WAYS NORTH. BUT HOW FAR, WE CANNOT SAY. SHE IS ALIVE, AS YOU SAW, AND OUR DETECTION SPELLS WERE UNDISCOVERED.

IF MY ANGER IS EARNED...?

THAT IS ALL WE CAN DO FROM HERE. YOU MUST GET CLOSER, AND SEEK FROM ANOTHER TROLLHOME.

WE THANK YOU FOR YOUR HOSPITALITY AND YOUR AID. IT WILL NOT BE FORGOTTEN.

NORTHEAST OF HERE, HM?

WHAT?

IT'S HEADING INTO THE SEAT OF MY ***FAMILY'S POWER*** HERE. WHICH COULD BE ***GOOD.*** ON THE OTHER HAND...

WHAT?

NOTHING, ***NOTHING.***

IT CAN'T BE... CAN IT?

After all that the night before, I'd thought maybe he had decided to trust me more.

YEAH, I ***GUESS.*** NOTHING.

But that was just schoolboy stuff to him, apparently. And I still didn't get to be privy to the big stuff. For security reasons.

But they gave Guy a few pointers, and we gathered our gear...

ALL IN THIS TROLLHOME HAVE BEEN OF GREAT HELP TO US, AND WE'RE GRATEFUL.

WE'LL DO OUR BEST TO USE THE INFORMATION WISELY...

...AND WILL REMEMBER YOU AS FRIENDS.

HHFF!

WE DO AS WE ARE ORDERED. BUT YOU ARE HUMANS. AND IN OUR EXPERIENCE, HUMANS ALWAYS BRING TROUBLE.

I WISH I COULD SAY YOU WERE WRONG.

AND AGAIN, OUR THANKS.

And as soon as the doors closed behind us...

...it was like there'd never been anything there.

WHAT DID HE MEAN BY MY ANGER BEING ***UNEARNED,*** ANYWAY? SHE'S BEING —

YOU DON'T ***KNOW*** HER, LAD. IT'S ***LIGHTBORN GLAMOUR,*** AS I SAID BEFORE.

GUARD ***AGAINST*** IT.

OKAY, OKAY.

BUT WHERE WE'RE ***HEADED.*** WHAT YOU SAID ABOUT IT...

I was going to press him, try to get him to tell me why he was worried. But suddenly...

...there was darkness and mist, bone-chilling shrieks...

...and the beat of powerful wings...

CHAPTER SIX

Warlords and Kings

Baden-Württemberg, Occupied Swabia.

Near the Oberwald Trollhome.

WHAT IN —

SKAAAAAAA

KRII!!

STURMRABEN! THEIR *BITE'S* VENOMOUS AND THEIR BREATH'S *WORSE!*

BUT IT'S THE *KRABBELMEN* RIDING THEM THAT ARE THE *TRUE* THREAT!

KEEP THEM AT *BAY,* WHILE I —

SCHAAAAA...

They came at us, screaming and cawing. And the things on their backs —

— I'd swear they were giggling.

Then the birds gaped wide, and —

It was as bad as Guy said it would be.

Noxious, blinding, choking —

=K-KOFF!= C-CAN'T — CAN'T *SEE* —

HOLD YOUR *BREATH,* LAD!

I'LL =KOFF= *DEAL* WITH THEM!

JUST HANG ON FOR A —

BLWAHHH IKA—

KOFF —

H-UKHH!

TZZT

FRSSH

SCHIAAA!

FRAAA

G-GOOD GIRL, BRITOMART! JUST N-NEED A —

I was getting dizzy, my head spinning. It was like the whole world was... rippling around me...

FLETCHER! USE THIS!

BUT IT — IT'S NOT *FINISHED!*

THERE'S NO *TRIGGER MECHANISM,* NO =KOFF= SH-SHAFT FACINGS —

JUST USE IT!

I —

It made no sense. But I grabbed the stock, muttered the cantrip for prana-quarrels —

SHI SHI SHI SHI...

And –
WH-WHAT – ?!
TZANG
ZANGG
PTAM
KAMM
TKAM
WELL DONE, SON! NOW JUST *KAFF* HOLD THEM OFF FOR A FEW SECONDS MORE –
BUT IT – IT MAKES NO –
A-ALL RIGHT –
I kept firing, even if I had no idea how. Kept them away from Guy –
While he –

KRAKAMM

FTHPP

WHDD

TH D

It took a little bit before I could see again. And a little more still before I could hear...

ARE YOU *ALL RIGHT,* SIR?

I'M FINE.

TAKES A BIT *OUT* OF YOU, THOUGH, THE BIG SPELLS.

WRAR RAA

KIKIKI!

SO...WHAT HAPPENED WITH MY *CROSSBOW?* I KNOW YOU WERE CARVING IT, BUT... IT REALLY *ISN'T* DONE.

MAGIC'S *MAGIC,* LAD.

THE BOW GIVES YOU A *FOCUS.* SOMETHING THAT PUTS IT INTO A FORM YOU CAN *UNDERSTAND.*

THAT HELPS *YOU.* BUT THE *MAGIC* DOESN'T CARE.

IT... DOESN'T?

AHH, *BRITOMART.*

CRRT?

YES, YOU *WERE* A GREAT HELP. AS ALWAYS.

WE'D BETTER *GO,* FLETCHER. WE MADE A LOT OF *NOISE,* AND THERE MIGHT BE WORSE THINGS COMING.

LET'S NOT BE HERE WHEN THEY *ARRIVE,* EH?

Kocherdorf, Occupied Swabia.

May 10, 1916.

We'd avoided towns, up until that point. "Too many people, too many eyes," Guy had said.

But this was the third we'd now passed through, letting the dragonets make their way around.

We needed to muddle up our scent with others, he said. And entangle our mystic signature, whatever that meant.

Make it harder to track us.

COME ON, LAD, WE'VE NO NEED FOR DAWDLING. WE'VE GOT TO...

WHAT? WHAT IS IT?

THERE, ON THE WALL...

THE POSTERS. WE HAD POSTERS LIKE THAT AT HOME, TOO. DIFFERENT POSTERS, OF COURSE.

BUT WHAT THEY SAID...

SUPPORT THE WAR. PROTECT WOMEN AND CHILDREN FROM THE EVIL FOREIGNERS.

JOIN THE FIGHT. CONTRIBUTE. WORK HARD TO HELP THE TROOPS.

IT'S ALL THE SAME THING, ISN'T IT? ON BOTH SIDES.

IT USUALLY IS, YES.

AND THERE. LOOK OVER THERE.

EVERYONE LOOKS HUNGRY. TIRED. GROUND TO A NUB.

AND THE — THE GIANTS, THE OAKMEN? THERE'S TALK BACK HOME ABOUT HOW OUR TROLLS AND GNOMES DON'T GET PAID AS WELL AS HUMANS DO...

...BUT THESE, HERE, THEY LOOK LIKE SLAVES.

IS THIS WHAT THE PEACE OF CHARLEMAGNE BROUGHT TO THE WORLD? ARE THEIR LIVES BETTER OFF BY BEING HERE? ARE ANYONE'S?

REMEMBER TO KEEP YOUR VOICE DOWN, LAD.

AND WE NEVER KNOW WHAT THE FUTURE WILL BRING. WE JUST...WE TRY TO MAKE IT THE BEST WE CAN MANAGE.

THE BEST?

IF THIS IS THE BEST, I DON'T WANT TO THINK ABOUT WHAT THE WORST COULD BE. I DON'T KNOW HOW YOU CAN EVEN SAY THAT.

NOT WITH THE WAY YOUR FAMILY'S TREATED YOU...

TCH. LET'S MOVE ON, FLETCHER. PEOPLE ARE STARTING TO PAY ATTENTION.

BUT —

OKAY, OKAY.

Once we were out of town...

LOOK, THE WAR'S ***TERRIBLE,*** I'LL GRANT YOU THAT. WARS ***ARE*** TERRIBLE. THAT'S WHY WE'RE TRYING TO ***END*** IT.

BUT THERE'S STILL GOOD AND BAD, SOMETIMES ***BECAUSE*** OF THE WAR.

TAKE ***ME,*** FOR INSTANCE.

I'M A ROYAL ***BASTARD.*** IF NOT FOR THE WAR, I MIGHT NOT ***BE*** HERE — HISTORY'S ***FULL*** OF ROYAL BY-BLOWS WHO WERE KILLED YOUNG...

...OR GOT DRAGGED INTO ***REBELLIONS*** WHETHER THEY LIKED IT OR NOT. BUT I'M ***USEFUL,*** SO I'M STILL HERE.

AND THE WAR GAVE ***YOU*** OPTIONS, DIDN'T IT? WHAT WOULD YOU ***BE*** IF YOU WEREN'T A WIZARD?

WELL, I'D PROBABLY BECOME A ***BLACKSMITH,*** LIKE MY FATHER. BUT I'M NOT A ***WIZARD.***

OH? ***AREN'T*** YOU?

WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE TO ***DO,*** AFTER THE WAR?

I'D LIKE TO KEEP ***FLYING,*** IF THEY LET ME. BUT WHAT'S THE CHANCE OF THAT?

IF THEY LET YOU.

HUH?

THEY REALLY ***DO*** LIKE TO KEEP THEIR SECRETS, DON'T THEY?

NOTHING, NOTHING.

We camped for the night again. Guy slept like a log.

I wasn't so lucky. My dreams —

FLETCHER. FLETCHER!

DU MUSST MIR ZUHÖREN, JUNGER KRIEGER. DEINE WELT IST IN GROSSER GEFAHR. DU MUSST MASSNAHMEN ERGREIFEN, UM SIE ZU BESCHÜTZEN.

I dreamt of him again. Charlemagne.

There was something he wanted to tell me. Something urgent.

DU MUSST [illegible] EIN GROSSES [illegible] SICH ZUSAM[illegible] DU MUSST SO[illegible] DIE KRÄFTE [illegible] LICHTGEBOR[illegible] AUCH DER MENSCHEN VERSAM[illegible]ELN!

IHR MÜSST GEMEINSAM HANDELN, BEVOR ES ZU SPÄT IST!

But I couldn't hear him. I tried, harder and harder, but –

B-HUHH!

I didn't understand why I was getting these dreams. Why not Guy? Why not someone else?

CRRT?

I just felt... like I was too small for this job, whatever it was.

I'M OKAY, HILDA. YES, I REALLY AM. GO BACK TO SLEEP.

CRR...

Like maybe we were all too small for it.

But that didn't mean no one was big enough.

The next day, I told Guy about the dreams. He seemed interested, but didn't say anything much. So I told him...

I'M ALL EARS, LAD. LET'S ***HEAR*** IT.

IT'S PROBABLY ***STUPID,*** BUT I DON'T KNOW. MAYBE NOT.

LOOK, I'VE BEEN THINKING.

I MIGHT HAVE AN ***IDEA.***

THOSE ***POSTERS*** WE SAW IN THAT TOWN. I SAID WE HAD THEM BACK ***HOME,*** TOO.

BUT THERE'S ONE I'VE SEEN ***AROUND,*** AT THE AERODROMES, EVEN IN LONDON. YOU'D ***REMEMBER*** IT, I'D BET.

"IT'S OF SOMEONE CALLED THE ***BLOOD EMPEROR,*** WHO THEY SAY IS THE TRUE POWER BEHIND THE WAR.

"A ***BLOODTHIRSTY MONSTER.***

"I DON'T KNOW IF THERE'S ANY ***TRUTH*** IN THAT, OR IF IT'S ALL JUST MADE UP..."

THERE MIGHT BE ***SOMETHING,*** YES.

WELL, IF THERE IS — IF THERE'S ***TRULY*** SOME MONSTER FROM LONG AGO HERE —

— THEN MAYBE THE ***ANSWER'S*** IN THE OLD WAYS, TOO. THE OLD ***HEROES.*** THE ***HERZE-KINGS*** YOU TOLD ME ABOUT, LIKE ***CHARLEMAGNE*** AND ***ARTHUR.***

THEY'RE STILL *AROUND*, RIGHT? SLEEPING SOME *ETERNAL SLEEP* UNTIL THEIR COUNTRIES NEED THEM AGAIN? *KING ARTHUR'S* SUPPOSED TO BE, AT LEAST.

WHAT ABOUT THAT *OTHER* ONE? BARBER-SOMETHING. ISN'T HE AROUND *HERE* SOMEWHERE?

"*BARBAROSSA.*

"*FRIEDRICH I,* HOLY ROMAN EMPEROR. DUKE OF *SWABIA,* KING OF *BURGUNDY,* KING OF THE *TEUTONS,* KING OF THE *ROMANS.*

"RAZED *TORTONA* TO THE GROUND, FOUGHT WARS ACROSS *TUSCANY* AND *NAPLES.* DIED IN THE *THIRD CRUSADE,* OR SO THEY SAY.

YES. HE'S...MORE OR LESS LOCAL. WHY DO YOU *ASK?*

WELL, *YOU* KNOW...

HE WAS A *HERO.* HE UNITED A LOT OF *EUROPE.*

AND...?

AND HE'S A *HERZE-KING,* YOU SAID. HE'S *POWERFUL.* HE COULD HELP US WIN.

WHY DON'T WE *WAKE HIM UP?*

HFF

IT'S... NOT AS *SIMPLE* AS ALL THAT, LAD.

AND THERE'S... I'M NOT SUPPOSED TO...

LAND *HERE.* LET'S TRY SOMETHING.

HUH?

YOU SAID YOU'D *KEEP FLYING,* IF THEY LET YOU.

YEAH, BUT THEY'LL —

THEY'LL *TAKE BACK* THE ORICHALC. RIGHT?

BUT THERE'LL BE *MORE.* SMUGGLING, THE BLACK MARKET, THERE'S *ALWAYS* A SOURCE FOR WHAT PEOPLE WANT. AND THERE ARE *OTHER* SOURCES.

OTHER SOURCES...?

YOU DIDN'T EVEN KNOW BARBAROSSA'S *NAME.* HOW DID YOU KNOW HE'S SOMEWHERE AROUND *HERE?*

I...DON'T *KNOW.* I *HEARD* IT SOMEWHERE?

BUT NOT HIS *NAME?*

IF YOU'RE HAVING VISIONS OF *CHARLEMAGNE,* MAYBE YOUR FAMILY HAS ROOTS IN THE AREA. THE BARRIERS GET *THIN* TO THE RIGHT LINEAGE...

LOOK, WHAT'S THIS *ABOUT?*

MAYBE YOU'RE *OPEN* TO THE LOCAL MAGIC. MAYBE IT'S FLOWING INTO YOU, AND THAT'S WHY THE *DREAMS.* SEE IF YOU CAN TAP INTO *IT.*

HOW?

YOU REACH OUT TO YOUR *DRAGONET* WHEN YOU CAST THE SPELL TO FLY. DO THAT, BUT JUST... *GENERALLY.*

ALL RIGHT. JUST *REACH OUT...*

FEEL ANYTHING?

...MAYBE? I DON'T KNOW.

MAGIC'S ***MAGIC.*** IT'S ABOUT ***LAND.*** PEOPLE. ***BLOOD.*** THERE ARE RULES...

YEAH, I—

...BUT THE RULES THEY TAUGHT YOU AREN'T ***ALL*** OF IT. THEY'RE ONLY THE ***START.***

WHEN YOU LEARNED YOU TO FLY, THEY GAVE YOU JUST A ***FEW SPELLS.*** AND TAUGHT YOU BY ROTE. NO ***THEORY,*** JUST WORDS AND GESTURES.

THAT WAS PARTIALLY DUE TO ***SPEED*** AND ***NEED,*** BUT ALSO BECAUSE THEY DON'T WANT TO ***FLOOD*** THE WORLD WITH WIZARDS ***AFTER*** THE WAR.

BUT YOU CAN DO ***MORE*** THAN YOU KNOW.

HERE. THE ***SCARF SPELL*** YOU LEARNED, SO YOU CAN FALL SLOWLY?

TRY IT WITH ***THIS.***

THE ***SCARF SPELL?*** WITH A ROCK?

THE ***CROSSBOW*** WORKED, DIDN'T IT? EVERY SPELL YOU KNOW IS MORE ***ADAPTABLE*** THAN YOU THINK.

JUST ***TRY*** IT.

O-OKAY.

AURA FILUM

HOW DO YOU ***FEEL?***

COLD. HEAVY.

GOOD. ***FOCUS*** ON THAT.

OKAY. I'M FEELING COLDER. AND *SOLID*, LIKE I'M —

— H-HUH?

FOCUS.

AND THAT'S THE *LESSON*, YOUNG LIEUTENANT ARROWSMITH.

MAGIC'S *MAGIC*.

SO. TELL ME...

...WHAT DO YOU WANT TO DO AFTER THE WAR ***NOW?***

I...I...

...WOW.

HA! I FELT LIKE THAT, THE FIRST TIME I MADE A ***CLOUD*** MOVE.

YOU DID THAT BECAUSE YOU DREW ON THE ***LOCAL MAGIC.*** BUT NOW, KNOWING ***HOW,*** YOU CAN DO IT ANYWHERE.

AND YOU CAN ***"BORROW"*** FROM OTHER THINGS. NOT AS WELL AS IF YOU'D BEEN ***BOUND*** TO THE MAGIC WITH RITUAL. BUT WELL ENOUGH.

WELCOME TO ***WIZARDRY,*** LAD. IT JUST GETS BIGGER FROM HERE.

The next day, we reached another trollhome.

They hadn't been told we were coming, but they'd heard about us. And they accepted Guy's sigils of introduction.

But if the trolls of Oberwald were chilly to us...

... these guys were downright frosty.

Still, they agreed to help.

WE BEGIN YOUR SEEK-SPELL NOW. STAY BACK. AND STAY SILENT.

HMP.

SHE IS THERE. WE WILL GIVE TO YOU THE DIRECTION OF WHERE SHE IS IMPRISONED.

BUT THERE IS GREAT POWER THERE. GREAT AND DARK POWER.

YOU MUST GO NOW.

DO NOT BRING TROUBLE TO US. NOT TO ANY TROLL.

WHAT?

WE NEED ***MORE THAN THAT!*** IS SHE ***ALL RIGHT?*** ARE THEY ***HURTING*** HER? HOW DO WE —

SLM

JERKS.

THEY ***KNOW*** HOW BAD THIS IS. THEY KNOW WHAT'S AT ***STAKE.*** AND THEY DON'T WANT TO ***HELP.***

NO, THEY'D RATHER KEEP THEIR ***HEADS DOWN,*** NOT GET CRUSHED BY A FIGHT THEY'RE NOT A ***PART*** OF.

BUT THEY HELPED ***ANYWAY.***

When we stopped for the night, Guy taught me more about magic.

About techniques to borrow the qualities of something solid, like a stone, or something living, like Hilda, and how they differ.

And he talked about how you can commune with weather, with air and water. But it was too soon for me to try that.

Still, he was... clipped. Terse. Like he was wary of something. Suspicious.

UH, LOOK, GUY. UM, SIR. ARE YOU ***MAD*** AT ME? DID I DO SOMETHING ***WRONG?***

DON'T ***WORRY*** ABOUT IT. I'M JUST... I'M TRYING TO WORK SOMETHING ***OUT,*** THAT'S ALL.

OKAY. THEN... HERE'S WHAT ***PUZZLES*** ME. THE ***PRUSSIANS,*** THE ***TYROLIANS,*** THEY KIDNAPED THE PRINCESS, THAT PART I FOLLOW. BUT IF THEY'RE ***CAUGHT...***

...WHAT DO THEY ***DO?*** CAN THEY ***WITHSTAND*** THE LIGHTBORN'S VENGEANCE?

I WOULDN'T THINK SO. BUT MAYBE THEY'RE ***DESPERATE.***

OR ***ARROGANT*** ENOUGH TO THINK THEY CAN.

OR MAYBE...WE KNOW THEY'RE WORKING WITH THE ***DARKBORN.*** THEY'VE MADE ALLIANCES. MAYBE THEY HAVE ***POWERFUL*** ONES.

STRONG ENOUGH TO CHALLENGE EVEN ***OBERON.*** SOMEONE ***VERY*** SERIOUS.

THAT'S WHAT I ***MEAN!*** LOOK, I ***APPRECIATE*** YOU TEACHING ME MAGIC AND ALL, BUT WE NEED ***HELP.*** ***SHE*** NEEDS HELP.

NO OFFENSE, BUT SHE NEEDS MORE THAN ***JUST US.***

FLETCHER... *WHY* IS CHARLEMAGNE TALKING TO YOU IN YOUR DREAMS?

WHAT? I HAVE NO IDEA. WHAT DOES *THAT* HAVE TO DO WITH ANYTHING?

MAYBE HE WANTS TO *HELP.* WHY DON'T WE JUST *GET* HIM TO? WAKE HIM *UP?*

I MEAN, ISN'T IT *OBVIOUS? CHARLEMAGNE, ARTHUR, BARBAROSSA,* THAT GUY FROM *ATLANTIS! WAKE THEM ALL UP!*

THEY'RE *STRONG ENOUGH* TO DO IT! *END THE WAR! SAVE LIVES! SAVE HER!*

AAAAAAH. THERE'S *SO* MUCH I'M NOT SUPPOSED TO SAY. SO MUCH I'D BE A RIGHT *IDIOT* TO SAY.

IF HE'S WORKING *THROUGH* YOU — IF IT'S A PLAN —

FLETCHER, IT'S JUST *NOT* A GOOD IDEA. IT'S... IT'S REALLY NOT A...

WHY NOT?!

TELL ME SOMETHING, SIR! TELL ME SOMETHING *REAL!*

I WANT TO KNOW *WE'RE DOING OUR BEST!*

AND *I* WANT TO KNOW WHETHER YOU'RE REALLY A *DUMB KID* FROM YOKELVILLE *INADVERTENTLY* BEING AFFECTED BY LOCAL MAGIC, BOY —

— OR IF YOU'RE PLAYING SOME *OTHER GAME.*

WHAT?!

Y-YOU THINK I'M A *SPY?*

NO. I ***DON'T.*** I REALLY DON'T. BUT THE WAY I'M ***SUPPOSED*** TO THINK — I'M SUPPOSED TO THINK LIKE MY ***FAMILY*** —

OH, TO ***HELL*** WITH IT.

FLETCHER, HERZE-KINGS AREN'T ***STORYBOOK TALES.*** AND THEY AREN'T ***WEAPONS*** YOU CAN PICK UP AND THEN PUT BACK ***DOWN.***

WE CALL THEM ***HEROES.*** PRAISE THEIR EXPLOITS. BUT HOW DO YOU THINK THE PEOPLE OF ***TORTONA*** FELT? OR THE ***TURKS,*** IN THE CRUSADES?

IT DEPENDS ON WHICH SIDE OF THE ***SWORD*** YOU'RE ON.

THE ***LAND*** THEY SLEEP UNDER. THE LAND ***ALL AROUND*** US...

...IT WAS ***THEIR*** LAND, FLETCHER. ***THEIRS.***

EVEN THE ONES WE ***PRAISE,*** THEY WERE CONQUERORS. ***WARLORDS.*** AND ***AMBITIOUS.*** THEY DIDN'T ***SERVE*** OTHERS.

IF YOU ***WAKE*** THEM, THEY'D WANT THEIR LAND BACK. AND THEY'D LIKELY WANT MORE. AS MUCH AS THEY COULD ***TAKE.***

IT STILL MIGHT BE WORTH IT. ***WE*** HAVEN'T DONE SUCH A GOOD JOB WITH IT.

WHERE DOES BARBAROSSA ***SLEEP?***

THEY SAY HE'S UNDER THE ***KYFFHÄUSER MOUNTAINS,*** IN THURINGIA.

AND WHERE'S ***THAT?***

THAT'S WHAT I'VE BEEN SO DETERMINED NOT TO ***TELL*** YOU. BUT I DON'T THINK IT MAKES ANY ***DIFFERENCE*** NOW.

YOU WANT TO KNOW WHERE HE ***SLEEPS?***

IF THE LEGENDS ARE *ACCURATE,* HE'S RIGHT OVER THERE. STILL A WAYS TO TRAVEL, BUT WE'LL *GET THERE* BEFORE TOO LONG.

WHEN THE TROLLS POINTED THE *WAY* TODAY, IT SCARED ME PRETTY BADLY. BECAUSE I THINK BARBAROSSA JUST MAY BE *AWAKE,* LAD. AND WORSE...

...WE'RE HEADED *STRAIGHT* FOR HIM.

COVER GALLERY

COVER ART

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2021

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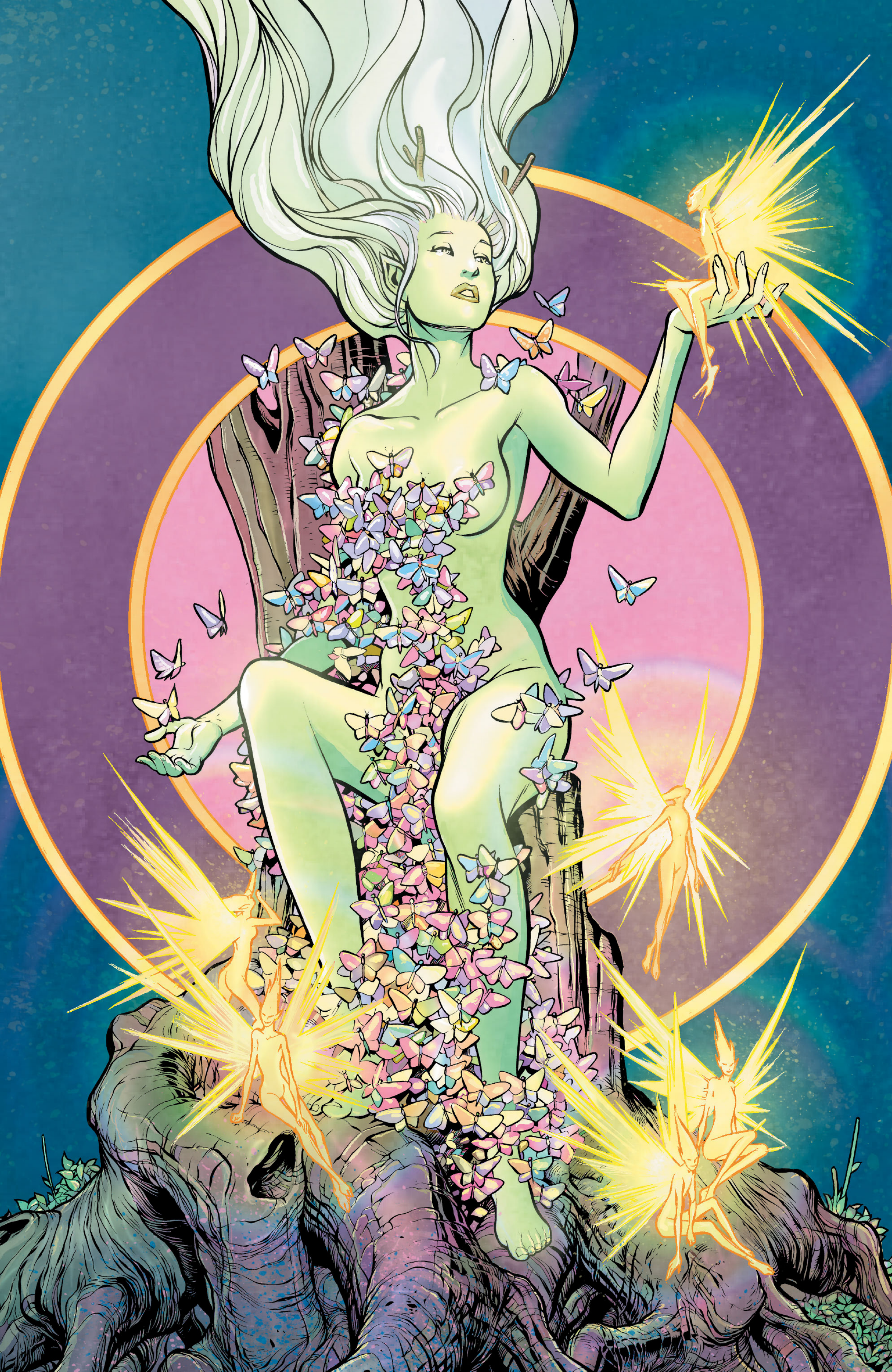

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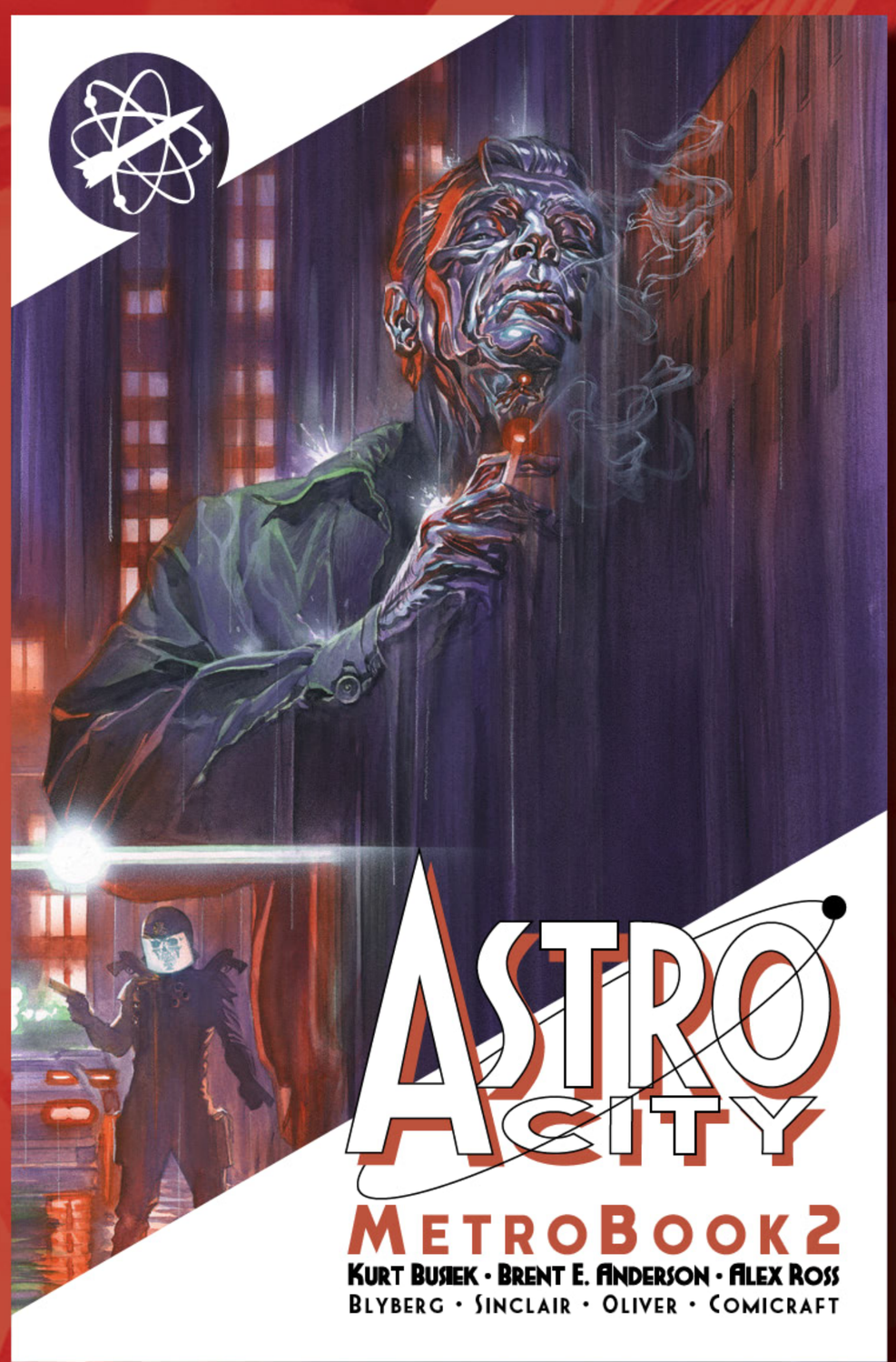
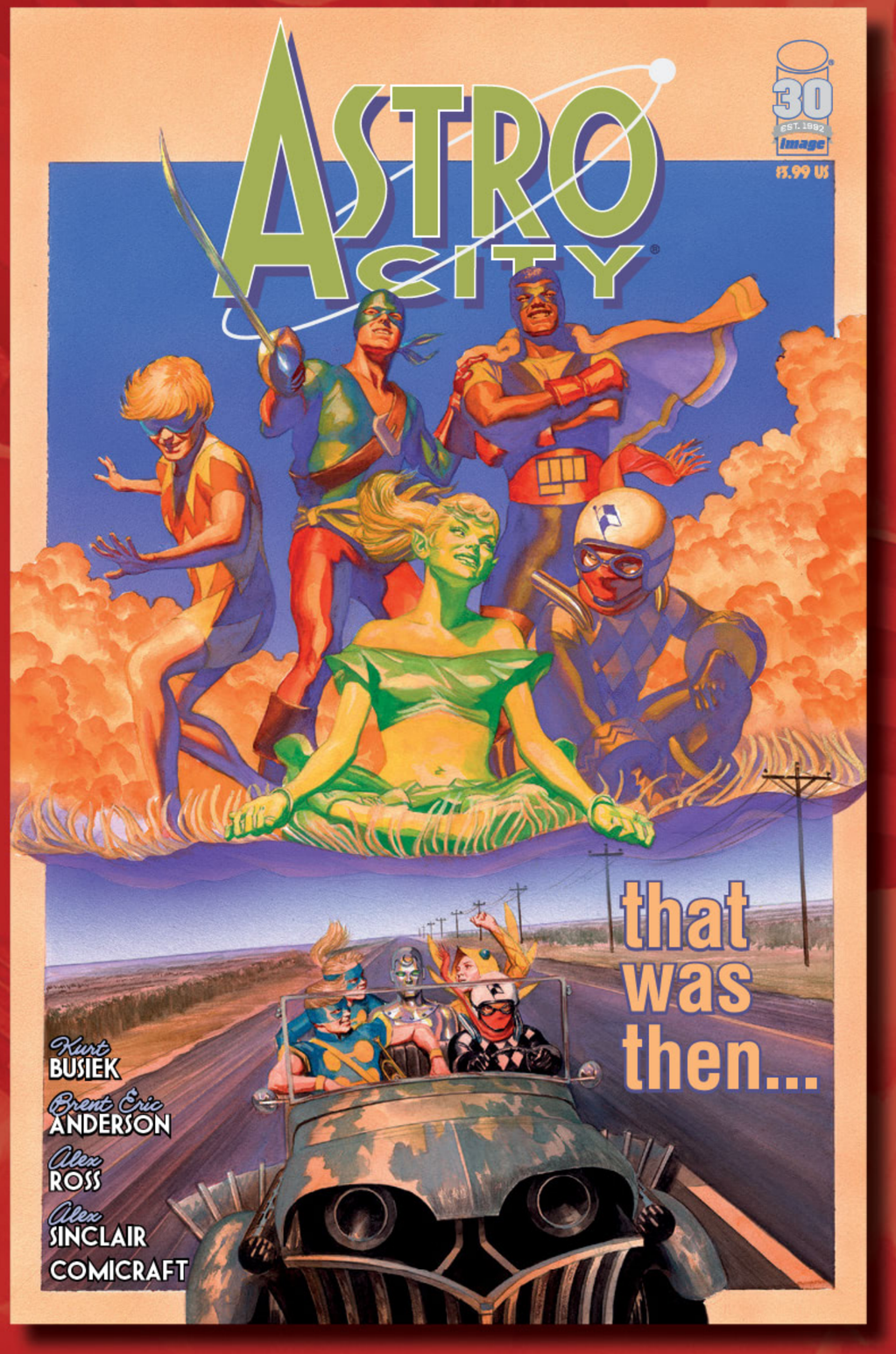
The Astro City Library





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ABOUT THE CREATORS

KURT BUSIEK is the New York Times bestselling and Eisner Award-winning writer of celebrated runs on *Avengers*, *Superman* (with Pacheco) and more, including the breakout hit *Marvels*, and the co-creator of *Astro City*, *Autumnlands* and *Thunderbolts*, among others. He lives in the Portland, Oregon area with his wife Ann and their children Dan and Kat.

CARLOS PACHECO is an internationally-successful artist, working in Spain, England and the United States. Coming to prominence for his work on *Dark Guard*, *Flash*, *Fantastic Four* and more, he's perhaps best known for *Avengers Forever* (with Busiek), *Green Lantern* and *X-Men*, and has co-created the series *Iberia Inc.* and *Triada Vértice*. He makes his home in San Roque, Spain.

JOSÉ RAFAEL FONTERIZ began his career in advertising, and did comics for his own pleasure, eventually breaking in as a professional in the magazine *Camacuc*, in Spain. He drew series such as "The Domino Effect" and "Captain Thunder" in Spain, and *Nocturne* for Marvel UK. He has been inking Carlos Pacheco since 2017, on *Occupy Avengers*, *The Life of Captain Marvel* and others.

JOSÉ VILLARRUBIA is an award-winning color artist known for his collaborations with Alan Moore (*Promethea*, *Voice of the Fire*, *The Mirror of Love*), Richard Corben (*Cage*, *Starr*, *Conan*), Paul Pope (*Batman Year 100*) and more. In addition to his comics work, his photography has been internationally-exhibited, and he is a professor of illustration at the Maryland Institute College of Art.

COMICRAFT is an award-winning design and lettering studio founded by Richard Starkings in 1992. Its work has appeared in a wide variety of comics from *Avengers* to *X-Men*, as well as television, movies and video games. Tyler Smith lives and works in Chattanooga, Tennessee.

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